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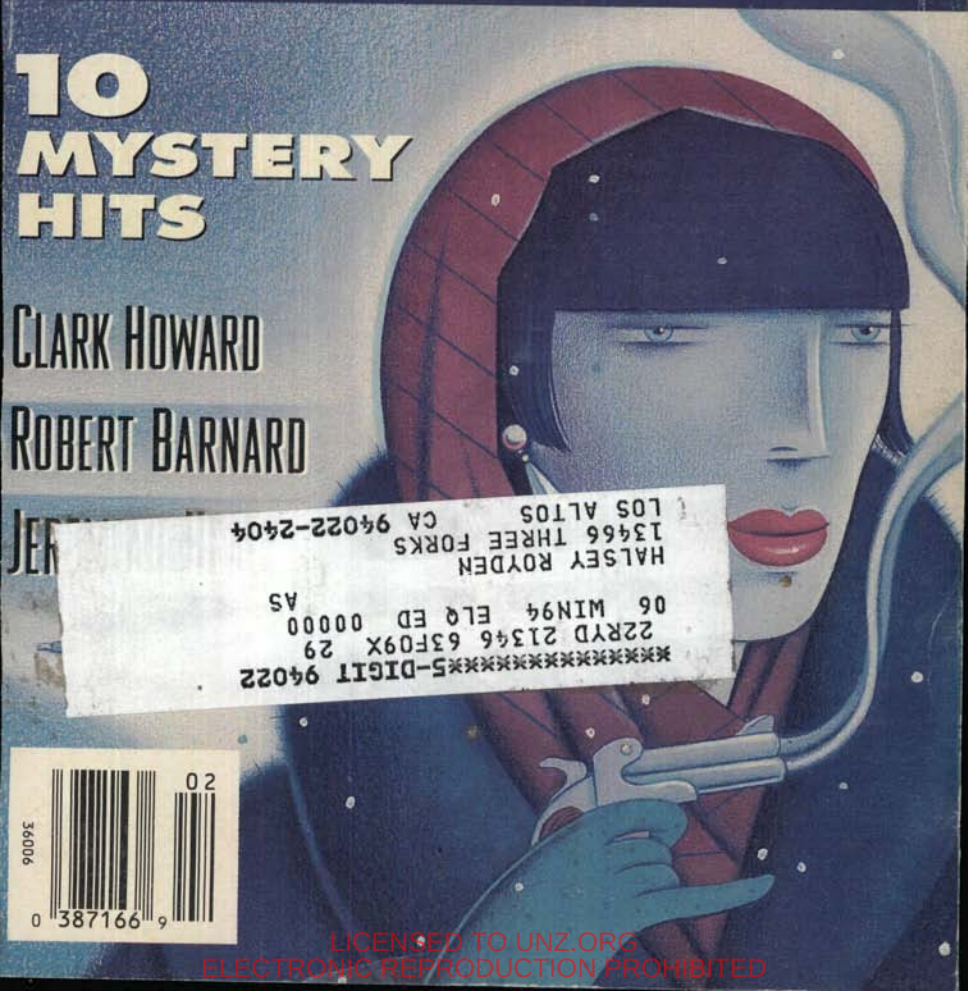

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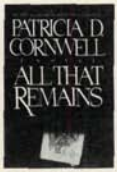


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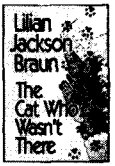


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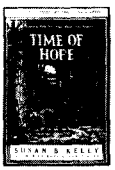


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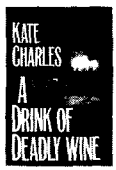


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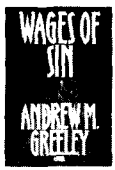


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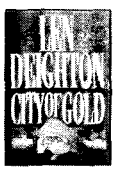


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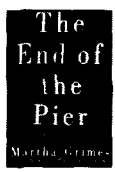


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**a *NEW* short story by**

**EDWARD D. HOCH**

*When Ed Hoch accepted our invitation to co-host the* EQMM, AHMM *Mystery Cruise with author John Lutz, we did not expect the added benefit of a story inspired by the trip; but Mr. Hoch's imagination is always at work, and here he has made use of tidbits picked up in Antigua and St. Maarten in a story that shows him at the top of his form . . .*

# THE SERPENT AND THE MONGOOSE

***by EDWARD D. HOCH***

Durning awoke shortly after dawn and pushed aside the curtains of the stateroom window. The cruise ship was passing a large island which he took to be Martinique. There were white buildings along the shore and up the sides of the mountains that betrayed the island's volcanic origins. A peaceful place, he thought, only just awakening for the day beneath a blanket of clouds.

Carol stretched and opened her eyes. "What time is it?"

"Five-thirty. You'd better get back down to your quarters before you're missed."

"Just a little longer," she begged. "Come on! Get back in with me."

"Hurry up and get dressed! We have too much riding on this for you to get in trouble now."

Grumbling softly, she slid from the bed and grabbed her clothes on the way into the tiny bathroom. He went back to gazing out the stateroom window. When she emerged a few minutes later she was fully dressed, even to the flying-fish pendant that always dangled

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from the gold chain around her neck. She paused for a quick kiss and slipped out the door, heading for the elevator which would take her down to the crew's deck.

Durning spent the next hour going over plans for the following days. The *Starshine* stopped at a different island each day, and that meant people to contact, arrangements to be made. Yesterday in Barbados it had been easy. He'd gone into Bridgetown with the other tourists in the morning and stopped at the little map store on Broad Street. The smiling man behind the counter had taken his boarding card and gone off to the cruise ship while Durning lingered in town for a couple of hours. Then the man had returned the card to him and the transaction had been completed. Durning watched a cricket match at Kensington Oval for a time before returning to the ship.

He'd been on board only a few minutes when he heard Carol's voice come over the ship's public-address system. "Welcome aboard to all our returning passengers. We hope you had a pleasant day in Barbados. Bridge games with the cruise staff are now getting under way in the card room."

Durning knew from the wording she used that all had gone well on her end. That night when she visited his stateroom she'd filled him in on the details. Today, with luck, things would go equally well on Martinique.

He dressed and left his cabin shortly after seven, when the ship's dining room opened for breakfast. He greeted the others at his table and scanned the familiar menu, finally deciding on the elaborate buffet. While standing in line for it his eyes scanned the other tables and came to rest on a man seated alone in the smoking section. He was short and bearded, looking a bit like the traditional representations of the devil. Durning knew the man and had reason to avoid him. His name was Felix Pond and he was a hired killer of an unusual sort.

That was when Durning decided it would be best to spend the entire day ashore, as far away from the ship as he could get. His appointment with the contact in Fort-de-France was not until noon, but after breakfast he signed up for a morning tour of a botanic garden situated some distance north of the city. About thirty of his fellow passengers were along and they made the trip in several hired taxis.

The guided tour lasted the better part of an hour, leading them along trails past exotic shrubs and formal gardens. The native guide spoke of more than a thousand different varieties of tropical and

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local plants. At one point they came to a high fence protecting them from a steep drop-off. Down below Durning could see nothing but a jumble of tropical vegetation.

"They call this the bottomless pit," the guide said with a smile. "It is a long way down."

"What's at the bottom?" a woman asked.

"Ah! The fer-de-lance lives there!" The guide seemed to take a special pride in it. "One of the deadliest snakes in the world. Luckily we have mongooses down there too, to keep them under control."

"Do they fight?" Durning asked.

"Oh, yes! Sometimes fights are staged here on the island."

"I understand a mongoose can kill a cobra."

"Yes, and a fer-de-lance, too. People sometimes make bets on the fights between them."

"But if the mongoose always wins—"

"Ah, the mongoose *usually* wins! But sometimes the fer-de-lance wins."

Durning nodded. "I'd like to see one of those."

"What time does your ship sail?"

"Not till seven o'clock."

The guide wrote an address on one of his business cards. "My name is Rodolphe Marin. Come here at four this afternoon and there will be a mongoose and snake fight."

"Is this illegal?" Durning asked a bit uneasily. He did not need a run-in with the law.

"No, no! But sometimes the events are private when large stakes are involved."

By the time they'd finished their tour of the botanic garden dark clouds were beginning to gather overhead. Durning wondered if a brief shower was on the way.

The clouds had yielded only the briefest of drizzles by the time he returned to Fort-de-France shortly before noon. Walking through La Savane park in the heart of the city he paused to study the white marble statue of Napoleon's wife, the Empress Josephine, the island's most famous resident. A plaque explained that she'd been born in the village of La Pagerie in 1763, but there was nothing to indicate when or how the head had been broken from the large statue. Perhaps it had been an act of protest from citizens who were not always as peaceful as they now appeared.

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Exactly at noon, Durning crossed the park to the ferry dock. In the men's room there he met his contact, a tall Englishman dressed like a tourist. "This is my boarding card for the *Starshine,*" Durning told the man. "It will get you on without question. Go to cabin six twenty-five and someone will be waiting there for you. Then return the boarding card to me here in one hour. You understand?"

"Certainly," the tall man said. He took the card and departed.

After a moment Durning left the men's room himself. He walked outside and watched the Englishman strolling in the direction of the cruise ship, like a passenger returning early from town. No one would question the camera case he carried. Durning's insistence upon retrieving the boarding card was mainly to keep it from falling into police hands if the contact was arrested later. Carol had supplied him with a duplicate to get him back on board if needed. This time there was no necessity for it. The man returned promptly and handed the card back to Durning.

"I hope you had a rewarding visit," Durning told him.

"Very rewarding, thank you. We will do business again."

They shook hands and parted.

Shortly before four o'clock Durning went to the address Rodolphe Marin had given him. It was on the rue Victor Hugo, near the city's main shopping area, and proved to be a small pet shop filled with exotic fish and tropical birds. The woman clerk spoke to him in French as he entered, but when he asked about the mongoose fight she motioned him toward the back room.

It proved to be larger than the shop in front, and already a dozen or so men were gathered there, talking in French and English as they placed their bets. A round wooden ring occupied the center of the room, with a few inches of sawdust in the bottom. Perhaps, Durning thought, this was to absorb any blood. The ring was about ten feet in diameter, and though it was empty, the milling crowd avoided it. Presently, at just after four o'clock, Rodolphe Marin himself appeared and stepped into the ring. He spoke quickly in French and then translated his remarks into English.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen. In a few moments you will witness a rare sight—a fight to the death between a fer-de-lance and a mongoose. Wagering is allowed on the outcome and after I speak you will have ten minutes more to place your bets. First let me tell you a little about these two animals. The mongoose has a long history of fighting and killing cobras in India, recorded by no less than

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Rudyard Kipling in his story 'Rikki-Tikki-Tavi.' They have up to forty teeth, well developed for shearing flesh. The mongoose was not originally native to Martinique, but was imported during the 1870s to kill rats on the sugarcane plantations. Some countries, like the United States, ban their importation because they kill many useful animals in addition to rats and snakes. Birds and chickens are among their favorite prey. The mongoose is not immune to snake venom. It is simply agile enough to avoid the strikes by jumping to one side or even into the air."

A wooden box about a foot long was brought in and placed at the edge of the ring. Marin watched it in silence and then continued. "The fer-de-lance is found only on the island of Martinique, although many related pit vipers are called by that name, and are found on the other islands and the mainland of Central and South America. The venom of the fer-de-lance is especially deadly. It is fast-acting and causes internal bleeding. For those of you wondering about the odds in the battle between these two enemies, let me say only that the mongoose usually wins, but sometimes the serpent wins. Now you have ten minutes to place your bets."

As the spectators milled about and odds were discussed, a heavy burlap sack was carried in by two men and deposited by the ring, opposite the mongoose's box. The spectators realized at once that the snake had arrived, and gave the sack a wide berth. Some were betting with each other, while others placed their bets with Rodolphe Marin. Durning was still deciding what, if anything, to do, when a voice behind him said, "Mr. Durning, isn't it?"

He turned and saw Felix Pond standing there, his black beard trimmed to a satanic point. "I don't believe we've met."

"Oh, surely we have! Someone introduced us at the nightclub called Eden last year, in New York."

Durning remembered all too well. A man he knew slightly had been gunned down the following day and it was general knowledge that Felix Pond or his people had carried out the execution. Pond was a new sort of hired killer, often employed by large multinational corporations when all else failed. If this bearded devil was interested in him, it was bad news indeed.

"Yes," Durning assented. "I remember now."

"Who do you like in the fight?"

"We haven't seen either animal, but I'd have to go with the mongoose. His box is quite well made. The owner must take pride in him, which suggests he's been around for a while."

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Felix Pond merely smiled, then suggested, "The box may have served many animals in turn. It proves nothing. Would you like to wager on the mongoose?"

"You'd take the fer-de-lance?"

"I would, sight unseen."

"What sort of odds do you want?"

"Oh, even money, Mr. Durning. My bets are always even money."

Durning felt suddenly confident. "A thousand dollars."

"We'll shake on it," Pond said, holding out his hand.

Marin reappeared a moment later, summoning everyone back to the ring. The crowd had increased now to about twenty, and there was an air of anticipation as the serpent was released from its sack. The fer-de-lance was about five feet long, as near as Durning could determine, with a thick reddish-brown body and tapering tail. The lance-shaped head that provided its name moved back and forth as if searching for the enemy it knew must be present. There was a low murmur from the spectators, and Durning noted the slight smile of triumph on Felix Pond's face. Perhaps he recognized the snake from some past encounter, or knew from its markings it was a good fighter.

The owner of the mongoose unlatched the end of the wooden box and opened it. "Rikki," someone said. The creature, named after Kipling's animal, was known to many of the local people, and this encouraged Durning. It had fought and won before. Rikki was about two feet long, with a grizzled brownish-black body, long tail, and short feet. It immediately rose up on its hind legs, the weasellike head turning to search for enemies. Spotting the serpent at once, it dropped back down and hugged the sawdust.

As the fer-de-lance slithered slowly forward, the mongoose moved closer too, sniffing along the ground. While still some distance away, the fer-de-lance struck without warning straight at Rikki. The mongoose leaped into the air as the lance-shaped head passed beneath him, then came down almost on the serpent's back, biting quickly but releasing his jaws at once as the serpent's tail lashed around like a whip. A few drops of blood appeared on the lacerated skin as the fer-de-lance coiled, waiting for a chance to strike again.

"The snake is wounded," Durning told Pond.

"That is nothing. The fer-de-lance needs only one bite."

It was true. The snake's fangs were uncovered as its head shot forward, this time barely missing the mongoose. Frustrated, it whipped around once more and gave a savage hiss. But Rikki was

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still too fast for it, darting this way and that, leaping out of danger at the last possible second. The sharp teeth of the mongoose flashed, and it sprang, landing on the serpent's back, biting deep and high on the body, just below the lance-shaped head. His teeth struck again, before the snake could move, ripping at the flesh. The tail of the fer-de-lance flicked once and then it was still.

"It is paralyzed now," Rodolphe Marin said quietly. "The end will be quick."

The mongoose ripped at another piece of flesh, and it was clear that the fight was over. A cheer went up among the winners. Money was exchanged.

Felix Pond shrugged. "Sometimes the serpent wins," he said simply, and peeled off ten hundred-dollar bills from the roll in his pocket.

Durning accepted the money and stuffed it into his pocket. "What do you want with me?"

"We are both in business, Mr. Durning. Let us go outside and talk like businessmen."

As they were leaving he saw the remains of the fer-de-lance being returned to the sack. Perhaps it would be burned, or dumped in the harbor. Outside it was still cloudy but at least it was not raining. They walked to the corner and Pond led him down a side street. After another turn and more walking, the short man started to speak. "You and your confederate have been engaged in a conspiracy against SeaKing Lines. Naturally they are very upset about it. Their entire cruise ship business could be ruined."

"Conspiracy? What conspiracy?"

"Do I need to spell it out, Mr. Durning?" He reached into his pocket and took out a color snapshot. It had been taken with available light and Durning recognized a street in San Juan, toward evening on the day they'd sailed. He was easily recognizable, speaking with a young woman wearing the blue and white uniform of the *Starshine*'s crew. Luckily, Carol's face was completely obscured by shadows.

"That looks like me," he said innocently. "Where'd you get this?"

Pond ignored the question. "You have a woman confederate aboard the ship," he said. "I believe she brings stolen diamonds and other gems aboard on the cruise. You make arrangements with jewelry merchants in each port to trade the gems for cocaine. While you are on shore, they board the *Starshine* with your boarding card and close the deal with this woman in one of the cabins. They leave with the jewels, which quickly find their way into legitimate mar-

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kets, and she sells the cocaine to the passengers and crew. With a potential market of nearly two thousand people, it's gone before the ship returns to San Juan."

"A nice story. You should write for television."

"The SeaKing people have been aware of this for some time, but they weren't able to determine exactly how the drugs got on board or who was involved. The police on these various islands hardly want to disrupt the lucrative tourist industry by barring ships or searching passengers."

"What are you supposed to do about it?" Durning asked.

"Stop this business, if necessary by taking out the company employee involved."

"Taking out?" Durning repeated, feeling a chill down his spine.

"There's another way, of course. Simply cease all operations. Tell your confederate to resign her position, whatever it is."

"I don't feel like making an admission of guilt, thanks."

Felix Pond exhaled softly, making a sound something like the hissing of the fer-de-lance. "Your guilt is already known. It's only a matter of identifying your partner."

"You won't do it from that snapshot. You'll end up killing an innocent person."

"I never kill an innocent person. I make very certain of that."

"I've heard enough," Durning told him, picking up his pace. "Stay out of my way."

Behind him, the voice of Felix Pond had the last word. "You have been warned."

Durning had been back on the ship only a short while when the public-address system came to life and he heard Carol's voice summoning him. "Passenger Adam Durning, please report to the tour desk for your tickets."

He waited five minutes in case Pond was watching and then casually made his way to the tour desk. "You paged me?" he asked her with a bland expression.

"Mr. Durning?"

"That's correct."

"Here are the tickets you requested for tomorrow's tours on St. Maarten. Will you be visiting the nude beach?"

"I think I'll pass that by."

Still keeping the same casual smile on her face, she dropped her voice and said, "He didn't have much today. I sold it all in the first hour. You have to do better than that."

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"He told me he had more."

"Never mind. I'll see you after midnight in your room."

"Be careful. A man named Felix Pond is aboard."

"What about him?"

"I'll tell you later. Don't come to the room if there's anyone else in the corridor."

They chatted casually for another minute or two, but no one seemed to be watching.

There was a knock on his stateroom door at 12:15. He opened it a crack and saw Carol's dark hair glistening in the light from overhead. She slipped into the cabin and sat down on the bed. "There was someone who seemed to be watching me tonight, during the amateur show," she told him. "When I was introducing the acts a man at a front table kept staring at me."

"Short man with a pointed black beard?"

"That's him."

Durning let out a sigh. He hadn't been careful enough. "It's Felix Pond. He's been hired by the ship's owners to get rid of us, however he can. They're afraid for their tourist business."

She grinned as she removed the flying-fish pendant from around her neck. "I'll bet they'd increase business if they started listing our services in their advertising."

"They're not likely to do that." He was in no mood for joking.

"How was your day ashore?"

"I saw a fight between a mongoose and a fer-de-lance."

"What happened?"

"The mongoose won. It usually does. That was the best thing that happened to me all day. I won a thousand dollars."

"Who from?"

"Felix Pond. He probably put it on his expense account."

After she'd undressed they slipped into the narrow bed together. "He bothers you, doesn't he?"

"Pond is a hit man of sorts. Corporations, especially foreign corporations, hire him to deal with embarrassments like us."

She thought about that. "Does he know who I am?"

"No, but anyone who bought from you could probably tell him."

"I'm very careful with my customers. I've dealt with some of them for years."

"Pond has a snapshot of us together in San Juan, but it's dark and he can't identify you."

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"Let's keep it that way."

"Maybe we should skip St. Maarten, lay low for the rest of the trip."

"I've got disappointed customers from today, Adam."

He thought about it, weighing the risks. "All right," he said finally. "One more time."

They both slept later than planned in the morning, and by the time they'd awakened it was well after six. Carol dressed quickly and hurried from the room, throwing him a goodbye kiss. He checked the corridor, but no one was waiting to catch them together.

During breakfast, Carol's voice came over the ship's public-address system. "I'm afraid I have some disappointing news for those of you looking forward to the nude beach at St. Maarten. The water near the shore is a bit rough and we won't be able to dock. Instead, we're going on to Antigua today. We should be there in another hour. For those of you who haven't gotten enough gambling on board the *Starshine,* there's a large gambling casino just across from the dock at Antigua. We'll have information on available tours shortly, and your account will be credited for any St. Maarten tours you were planning to take."

There were a great many jewelry stores on St. Maarten, and Durning was sorry to miss it. But the islands were quite close and perhaps they'd go back there the following day. After breakfast he returned to his stateroom, already made up by the cabin steward, and unlocked his suitcase. He found the coded list of contacts on Antigua and chose one he'd dealt with successfully in the past.

He left the ship before noon, as soon as it had docked at St. John's. Despite the casino Carol had mentioned, the port lacked the glamour of some of their other stops. Virtually all the jewelry stores were confined to the Heritage Quay area and surrounding streets near the docks.

Durning was heading for his destination, strolling across the little park at the center of the quay, when Felix Pond seemed to appear from nowhere and intercepted him. "Hello, there! It's quite a chore beating off the cabdrivers in these places. They all want to take you on a tour of the island."

"They are persistent," Durning admitted, trying not to betray his sense of frustration at Pond's sudden appearance.

"Can I walk a bit with you?" the bearded man asked.

"Of course, so long as you offer no more threats." His mind was racing, trying to work out a plan.

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After fifteen minutes of visiting shops together, it seemed obvious that Felix Pond would not be leaving his side. He suggested they stop for a beer in a bar adjoining the casino and Pond readily agreed. Halfway through the drink, Durning excused himself to go to the men's room. He'd noticed a pay telephone on the back wall, and the *Starshine* was newly equipped with ship-to-shore telephones in every room.

Pond's back was to him as he reached the ship and was connected to Carol's desk. "Pond is with me," he said, speaking softly but rapidly. "Can you get off the ship and make the contact yourself?"

"I suppose I could get off for an hour. What's the name?"

"Redcliffe Street, runs up the right side of Heritage Quay. Look for number thirty-eight and ask for Mr. Simmons."

"He'll have the goods?"

"Or he can get them in five minutes. The usual deal. Be careful."

"I'm always careful."

"I'll keep Pond occupied. Good luck."

He hung up and returned to the table. Pond looked up at him and smiled. "I would like to get my thousand dollars back. Are there any mongoose fights on Antigua?"

"Not that I know of. But the casino is just through that door."

"There's a casino on the ship. I'm looking for something a bit more exciting."

"Sorry I can't help." He finished his beer. "I think I'll wander back to the ship, maybe go for a dip in the pool."

He fully expected Pond to follow along, but when they reached the gangway the bearded man changed his mind. "You go ahead," he told Durning. "I'm going to look around town, maybe walk up to that church on the hill."

A male voice over the loudspeaker, reading a routine schedule of bingo games and dance instruction, seemed to confirm that Carol had gone ashore. Durning changed into his trunks and swam around the pool for a while, thinking of her. Maybe it was time they both got out of the business. It had been profitable over two seasons, but with the shipowners hiring someone like Felix Pond, the risks were beginning to outweigh the gains.

He was lounging in a deck chair about an hour later when Pond returned, taking the chair next to him. "Did you get to that church?" Durning asked.

"No, I had some other business to attend to."

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Durning caught something in his voice. "What was that?"

"The matter is cleared up now. I'll be reporting to my employers in San Juan."

"You talk in circles."

"I'll be more direct. Your operation is ended. Your mysterious partner was Carol Evans, the ship's social director. She died—" he glanced at the expensive watch on his wrist "—exactly twenty-five minutes ago."

Durning tried to hold himself steady, to keep his hands from shaking, to keep from leaping at Felix Pond and tearing his throat out. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"It was a clever plot, using her position on the ship as a way of communicating with would-be customers. Everyone heard her voice over the loudspeaker several times a day, only her words carried a special meaning for those in need of a fix or a snort."

"I don't believe you," Durning said quietly. "You wouldn't kill an innocent person. You said so yourself."

"It was a matter of business, Durning. You must understand that. The Caribbean cruise business is very profitable, but very competitive. SeaKing could not afford the bad publicity an arrest would bring." He stood up and moved to the railing. "This way it's best for everyone."

Durning rose and followed. "I don't believe she's dead."

Felix Pond merely smiled and reached into his pocket. "Here," he said, tossing something gold and glittery through the air between them. "I took it off her body myself."

Durning caught it and stood staring down at Carol's flying-fish pendant on its gold chain. "My God, Pond!"

"Satisfied?"

"You bastard! She was only trying to make a little money. She never harmed a fly!"

"She harmed a great many people, including my employers."

"You could have given her a chance!"

"I warned you. The warning extended to both of you. Fly back home and never set foot on a SeaKing ship again, and I'll do nothing more."

"She—she was only a kid!" He realized his voice was breaking.

"She was an example."

Durning rubbed his eyes and turned toward shore. At the end of the pier a pushcart vendor was selling tropical fruit. Some others were heading back to the ship. One of them—

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"You lied to me! That's Carol down there. She's not dead!"

He saw her walking quickly with that firm determined stride, carrying a package in one hand. Felix Pond had bluffed him. "So it is," the bearded man said, leaning over the railing as if to wave.

Then it was all in slow motion. Durning saw the pushcart vendor lift something black and tubular from beneath his fruit, just as Carol was passing. There was no sound but Durning saw a puff of smoke and Carol seemed to stumble into the cart, toppling the fruit to the ground. The vendor fired one more time with his silenced weapon, then tossed it into the harbor water and walked away fast.

Durning screamed, *"Carol!"*

But it was too late.

"I had to be sure," Felix Pond whispered into his ear. "The cabin steward found her flying-fish pendant in your room this morning, but I still had to be sure. I couldn't kill an innocent person."

Durning hugged the rail and felt the world collapsing around him. Down below, on the pier, passengers were gathering around Carol's lifeless body. "How could you do it like this?" he asked with an anguished cry.

"It was as they told you," Felix Pond replied. "Sometimes the serpent wins."

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*Robert Barnard is one of the cleverest satirists in the business. Here, not for the first time (see* Death and the Princess, *Scribners, 1982), the institution of royalty inspires him, as the son of Queen Victoria lays for a swindler at Balmoral . . .*

# BALMORALITY

***by ROBERT BARNARD***

I am going to write down a true account of the Merrivale business without help from my secretary because I know if it comes out I shall get blamed, especially by Mama, who blames me for everything that goes wrong in her circle, in Society in general—even, I sometimes think, in the country at large, as if I were somehow responsable for the national debt, the troublesome Afgans, and the viragoes who advocate votes for women. Nothing I say would influence Mama's opinion, in fact nothing anybody says does, but perhaps an account in my own hand, without the intervention of my secretary, will convince posterity that I was entirely blameless. Here is the whole truth of the matter.

The story begins in a corridor at Balmoral Castle, built in a baronial but incomodious style by my revered father when I was no more than a boy (but learning!). In Scotland the summer nights are short, and the twilights almost seem to murge into the first lights of dawn (especially for those who have brought their own supplies to orgment the meager rations of wines and spirits). I was, I must admit, in a pretty undignified position for one of my standing. I was squeezed into an alcove, perched on a sort of bench, shielded by heavy velvet curtains. Not a comfortable position for one of my gerth. I would very much have prefered to stand, but I tried that and found that

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my shoes pertruded under the bottom of the curtains.

So far I had seen nothing I did not expect to see. I had seen Lord Lobway leave the comforts of his marital bed for the delights of Mrs. Aberdovy's. I had seen Lady Wanstone tiptoe along to comfort the loneliness of the Duke of Strathgovern. I have corridor-tiptoed in my time, or been tiptoed to, and I do not condem. I have nothing against adultary provided it is between consenting adults. Seducing a young girl is the action of a cad, unless she is very insistant.

What I had not seen was the figure of that frightful fellow John Brown. Now please do not misunderstand me here. I did not for one moment expect to see the awful gillie going to my Mama's bedroom. I do not suffer from the vulgar misapprehension about their relationship. In any case Mama's bedroom is at least a quarter of a mile away, otherwise I would not have been hiding in the corridor! No, the door I was watching was that of Lady Westchester, and the reason was twofold: if I could catch John Brown out in a nocternal assingation with the lady, I could take the story straight to Mama (I already had my sorrowful mein well prepared) and that would perhaps see the end of his embarassing presence at her court; and secondly I have a definate interest in Lady Westchester myself, and I object to sharing her with a gillie. Her husband has been very willing to turn a blind eye (and even, since he sleeps in the next room, a deaf ear!) but I wonder whether he would be willing to do likewise for the repulsive Highlander? For when I heard Lady Westchester, in intimate converse with her best friend Mrs. Aberdovy, say "He's so delicously ordinary!" that, I concluded, was who she was talking about. I had seen her fluttering her eyelids at him when he helped her to horse. And which of the other servants mix with Mama's guests on that level of familiarity (or impurtenance)? When she begged me not to trouble her that night (I had not noticed it was any trouble) then I concluded that her assingation was with one infinately lower than myself.

Dinner had been Oxtail soup, sole, foie gras, turbot, snipe, crown of beef, game pie, steamed pudding, and one or two other trifles I had just picked at, but dinner was hours and hours ago. I was just beginning to feel hungry when I heard the sound of a door opening. I peered through the heavy folds of velvet. It was not Lady Westchester's door. I was about to withdraw into my alcove when I saw a scene in the open doorway that gave me furously to think. The door was Colonel Merrivale's, and coming out was a little bounder called Laurie Lamont, whose presence at Balmoral I found it difficult to

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account for. But what made my heart skip a beat was that I could see clearly that Merrivale was withdrawing his hand from the inside pocket of his jacket, while Laurie Lamont's hand was withdrawing from the pocket of his trousers.

Not an hour before Merrivale had been winning quite heavily off me and other gentlemen at poker.

Lamont scuttled off down the corridor and away to his room in some obscure corner of my Papa's Gothick pile, and I remained considering the scene I had just witnessed and hoping that the gastly gillie would make his appearance soon. I had waited no more than a few minutes when I heard footsteps. Looking out I saw that it was my own man! I shrank back, but the footsteps stopped beside my alcove.

"I would advise Your Royal Highness not to remain here any longer."

Well! He had barely paused, spoke in a low voice, and then continued on down the corridor. After thinking things over for a few minutes I emerged rather nonchalently and returned to my suite of rooms. Where my man awaited me.

"How did you know I was there?" I demanded.

"I am afraid, sir, there was a certain swelling which disturbed the hang of the curtain."

He has a clever way of putting things, my man. He meant there was a bulge. He is fair, tall, with an air that is almost gentlemanly and an expression that I have heard described as quizicle.

"Where had you come from anyway?" I asked.

"I was myself watching from another of the alcoves," he replied. I looked with distast at his discusting slimness. "I too had had my suspicions roused in the course of cards this evening."

I did not enlighten him as to which door I had in fact been keeping an eye on, or give any indication that the scene in the doorway had come as a complete bomshell to me. As he releived me of my clothes I let him continue.

"You remember, sir, that you summoned me to prepare some of the herbal mixture that you get such releif from, after too many cigars?"

"Shouldn't be getting short of breath these days," I complained. "I've cut down to just one before breakfast, and the odd cigarette."

"I rather fear that without noticing you have increased your consumption *after* breakfast, sir," he said. I allow my man great lattitude. He is invaluable in all sorts of little arrangements. "Anyway,

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the fact was I was in the card room for some time, during which Colonel Merrivale was winning quite heavily."

"Too damned heavily. I'm well out of pocket."

"Exactly, sir. And I noticed this Mr. Lamont. He was deep in converse with the Countess of Berkhampstead. She was telling him about her various ailments, and was so engrossed—predictably so, if I may venture to say it—that she was noticing nothing about him. They were by a mirror. By testing I realized he could see the cards of two of the other players. And I got the idea that he was making suttle signs to Colonel Merrivale."

"The damned rotters!" I exploded. "At Balmoral too! Windsor would be another matter, but Balmoral! I know Merrivale. He's brother to one of the Queen's Scottish equerries. Who is this Lamont fellow?"

"I have made enquiries about that, sir—talked to his man. He is active in civic affairs in Edinburgh, it seems. Has been pressing the case for a fitting monument in the city to the late Prince Consort. He has been agitating in the City Council and the newspapers for an Opera House, to be called the Albert Theatre."

"It will never happen. The good burgers of Edinburgh are far too mean."

"It may be, sir, that he doesn't expect it to happen, and that that is not the point. He has, after all, been invited to Balmoral. . . ."

"True. Mingling with those very much above his station."

"Quite, sir."

"Mama is too gulable. It's too much that people get invited here at the drop of the word 'Albert.' "

"I suspect it has been noted, sir, that the name is a sort of Open Sessamy."

"The bounders have to be exposed."

"Quite so, sir. But how?"

"I can charge him publicly with what I saw."

"Hardly conclusive, sir. And I see a difficulty: you were playing poker, for money, at Balmoral, sir."

He was his usual impurturbable self, but I huffed and puffed a bit, though nothing like as much as Mama would have huffed and puffed if she knew we had been playing poker for high stakes in what is vertually my late Papa's second morsauleum.

"Ah yes, well . . ." I said finally. "Might be a bit awkward. Though when I think how the Queen goes on about the company I keep . . ."

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"Perhaps we should sleep on it, sir. By morning we may have thought of something."

"Nothing to do but think," I muttered, as he pulled my nightshirt over my head. I leapt between the sheets, burning my leg on the stone hot water bottle. "I'm not used to sleeping alone. Alix would have been better than nothing."

For my dear wife has no love of Balmoral, and generally siezes the time of our annual visit for a trip to see her relatives. I make no objection. If her relatives had been German Mama would probably find her visits to them admirably fillial, but as they are Danish she says she is being selfish.

Well, I spent a lonely night warmed only by hot water bottles, but I can't say that in the morning I had come up with any great plan. All I could think of was whether John Brown was in with Lady Westchester, and what they were likely to be doing. Mind you, I don't think my man expected me to come up with anything. When he said we he meant I. He's got rather a good opinion of himself.

"Well, sir," he said next morning, as he shaved the bits of my face that needed shaving, "it's a beautiful day, and apparently the vote is for a croquy competition."

"Damned boring game," I commented. "Bonking balls through hoops."

"But you do play, sir."

"Oh, I can bonk with the best of them."

"Because I thought just possibly something might be made of it."

And he wisked off the towels just like the johnnie in the opera, and confided in me his thoughts.

The Arbroath smokies served at Balmoral are, I have to admit, unparalelled, and the kedgeree not to be despised. The sausages, bacon and black pudding are inferior to what we have at Marlborough House, but the beefsteaks can be admirable. I breakfasted alone. If I take a small table and look royal everybody knows I am brooding on affairs of state and I am not disturbed. When I had eaten my fill I lit up my second cigar of the day and strolled out on to the sun-drenched lawns. It did not even destroy my good humour to see John Brown setting up the hoops and pegs and three separate croquy lawns. Somehow I knew things were going to go according to plan.

Lord John Willoughby had been recruted to further the plot. Lord John is in fact alergic to croquy, but he was a fellow loser of the night before, and he was to be used as an apparently casual bystander. He

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had been approached by a deputation consisting of my man, and he had joyfully gone along with the idea. Those villians Merrivale and Lamont had been organised by Willoughby into opposing teams, and when I strolled up to Merrivale and said "Give me my revenge for last night, eh?" Lord Rishton willingly dropped out of the game and transferred to another team, which left me partnering the loathsome Lamont, with Merrivale's partner the delectible Lady Frances Bourne, whose only fault is her unshakable faithfulness to a damned dull husband. Still, if I couldn't partner her in any other sort of games, croquy it would have to be.

Willoughby, I'll say this for him, has a sense of humour. He arranged it so he stood on the sidelines of our game talking to Lady Berkhampstead. He was, too all intents and purposes, totally absorbed in her twinges of this and agonising attacks of that. I let the game proceed until I was well-poised to shoot my red ball through the fourth hoop and Lamont was rather poorly placed for getting his yellow ball through the third. Then, as he was standing beside his ball shielding it from the gaze of spectators, I gave the sign and both Willoughby and I stepped forward.

"That man moved his ball."

Laurie Lamont looked astonished, as well he might.

"I haven't touched my ball, sir. It's not my turn."

"I'll have no partner of mine cheating," I said.

"I saw him," said Willoughby, coming up. "He shifted his ball to a better position for his next shot."

"And where there's cheating, there's money on the game," I said menacingly. "I wouldn't mind bet— I strongly suspect that they've got a wager on this."

I looked meaningfully at Lamont, then equally meaningfully at Merrivale. I wanted both of them to understand *exactly* what piece of cheating was in question.

"And since no one would suspect Lady Frances of betting, I think we can take it that you, Merrivale, are the other culprit. Betting on a game of croquy in the grounds of the Queen's Scottish home! And cheating! You probably even have the wager on you, I'll be bound."

I knew they did. Lamont had his on him because he's one of these tradesmen chappies who won't leave loose money in their rooms even when they're guests of their Sovereign. Merrivale had his on him because his man had been persuaded by mine to slip it into the inside pocket of his jacket that morning.

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"I absolutely protest, sir," he now spluttered. "I have no money on me!"

He opened up his jacket, and pertruding from the pocket was an envelope. I extracted it and counted the money.

"One hundred and fifteen pounds. And no doubt you too have a hundred and fifteen?" Lamont squermed and kept his jacket tight-buttoned. I held out my hand and he took out the money. "Two hundred and thirty pounds. Well, well, well!"

It was the sum Merrivale had won the night before, shared equally with his accomplice. I pocketed it.

By now there were several bystanders, all curious to know what was going on. Lady Berkhampstead, interrupted mid-twinge, was loudly demanding to be told what was happening. I pointed to the Castle.

"Betting at Balmoral. I never thought to see this day. You sir—" I turned to Merrivale—"I would have expected to know better. You sir—" turning to Lamont—"I had no expectations of. I count on hearing that you have both left the Castle before nightfall."

There was a moment's pause. Merrivale spluttered, then the pair of them slunk in the direction of the Castle, their tails almost visibly between their legs. I walked over in high good humour to watch one of the other games.

"Just a little contratems," I said airily. "Regard our game as scratched."

That evening, when my man was poking and prodding me into my evening wear to make me presentable for the dreary horrors of a Balmoral dinner, he said:

"Colonel Merrivale's young daughter has been taken ill, and Mr. Lamont's mother. Quite a coincidence, sir."

I grunted my satisfaction, and in an interval of prodding said:

"That'll teach the Queen not to invite just any little squert who happens to suck up to her on the subject of Papa. I wonder if I should rub it in that she ought to be more careful who she invites?" I saw an expression pass over his face. I am very quick on the uptake. "Well, perhaps not. Perhaps I may just write an account of the whole busness for posteraty."

"That should make fasinating reading, sir."

My mind going back to the start of the busness and my concealment in the alcove, I said:

"Lady Westchester has intimated that I would be welcome tonight. Don't know that I shall take up the offer. Damned unpleasant not knowing who I'm sharing her with."

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"I happen to know, sir, that the reason Lady Westchester was . . . unavailable last night was because her husband especially requested the favour of a night with her. The sort of ladies his lordship habitually consorts with are in particularly short supply in the Balmoral area."

"Really?" I said, rather pleased. But then I pondered. "That doesn't explain the other thing, though."

"Other thing, sir?"

"I heard her say of some man that he was 'delicously ordinary.' I'm damned sure she was talking about John Brown."

There came over my man's face that smile that people call quizicle.

"Oh that, sir. Is that what you suspected? Her ladyship has been heard to say that to several people. I think she intends the remark to be paradoxicle."

"To be what?"

"A paradox, sir, is something that is apparently abserd or impossible, but turns out to be true. Her ladyship was not referring to John Brown, sir."

"Oh?"

"She was referring to you."

For a moment he took my breath away. When the idea got through to me I felt immensely flattered.

"Well, I say, you know, that really is rather a complement, don't you think? I mean, here I am, with all my advantages, rather marked off by my birth, set apart all my life for a special task, and yet I manage to keep the common touch to such an extent that she can say that about me. I feel quite touched. She's right. I am ordinary. No one would call the Russian Emperor ordinary, would they? Or the Kaiser? She really has me summed up very well."

"I'm glad Your Royal Highness sees it that way."

"I do. I'm obliged to you for clearing up the misunderstanding. In fact I'm obliged to you for giving the other matter such a satisfactory outcome too."

I felt about my person for something with which to show my appreciation of his very special services. It is one of the drawbacks of being royal that one has very little use for ready money, so one very seldom has any on one. Fortunately I have always found that people feel just as well rewarded by a sincere expression of Royal gratitude. I clapped my man on the shoulder.

"Thank you, Lovesy," I said. ●

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# The butler wasn't the only one whodunit.

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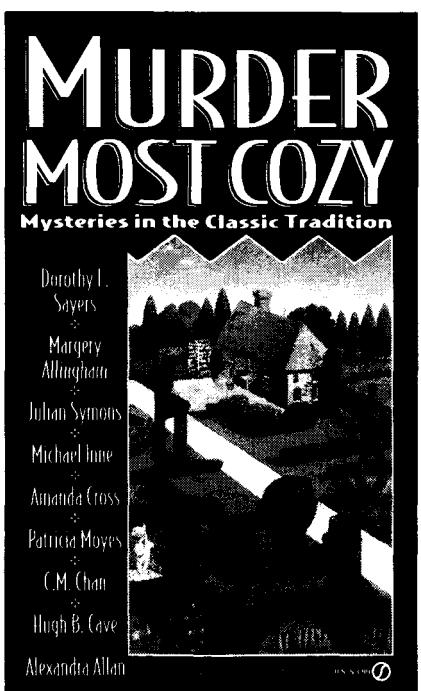


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**a *NEW* John Francis Cuddy story**

*Unlike the hero of his novels and stories, Jeremiah Healy does not hold a private investigator's license, but he does have first-hand experience of some of the things his P. I. deals with from another angle, for he is a professor of law at the New England School of Law in Boston. Mr. Healy's P. I., John Francis Cuddy, can often be found in the employ of attorneys, though in this outing he is retained by a prestigious brokerage house . . .*

# THE BAGGED MAN

## *by JEREMIAH HEALY*

1.

Charles Weinstein sat behind his desk and played with a miniature sailing yacht on the blotter. He reminded me of a four-year-old in his bathtub with a rubber duck. There were photos of two prior generations of Weinsteins on the wall to my right: the grandfather who had started the stockbrokerage firm of Weinstein, Peck; and the father who had left the firm to Charles. Since Charles was now in his early sixties, he'd been at the helm for a while, the pressures of anticipating the market not very evident in the fine white hair (cut preppy style), or in the unlined, squarish face (with its out-of-season tan), or in the rigorously conservative grey suit (that probably cost more than everything in my closet combined).

Weinstein said to the yacht, "So, Mr. Cuddy, could we start with one of your business cards?"

I rolled my rump in the captain's chair with the Harvard logo on it and fished out my wallet, slipping a "JOHN FRANCIS CUDDY, Confidential Investigations" from the slot where Weinstein probably carried VISA and Carte Blanche plastics with holograms on them. Weinstein took the card, flicked at its corners with the nail of his thumb, and seemed to be deciding where he'd hang it as a sail on the model in front of him.

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I took in the rest of the office, nestled into one of the old wharf buildings that before Boston's renaissance in the bicentennial summer could have been picked up for ten thousand in back taxes. Picture-window view of the dormant winter harbor, the working boats out long before, the pleasure craft berthed till spring. Diplomas from all the right places on the wall with the forebears. Furniture solid cherry and polished and nicely blended with the pattern in the oriental rug beneath us. Weinstein, Peck had the entire floor, and based on my walk through the large, crowded pit outside his office, it seemed Weinstein himself enjoyed the nicest corner of it.

Weinstein decided my card would look better under the border of his blotter than rigged to a mast. "You come highly recommended for your persistence, Mr. Cuddy."

"By whom?"

He seemed to like the "m" I'd put at the end of "who" and reeled off the names of three attorneys I'd helped over the years.

I nodded. "You've done that much homework, maybe you don't need me."

A tired sigh. "Oh, but we do. I'm sorry to say, we do." Weinstein swung in his judge's chair just a quarter turn, enough to appreciate his view. "You've heard of 'The Ain't'?"

Weinstein pronounced the name like a nun would say "turd."

I said, "Who hasn't?"

One disgusted nod. "That is, of course, part of the problem."

Every media outlet imaginable had covered the story in tedious detail. The Ain't had been a homeless man in a blue parka, green fatigue pants, and combat boots. He'd slept at a shelter called Bed-Down, run by a former Patriots linebacker who had given its endowment for safe investing to Weinstein, Peck. They'd plunged about half of it into junk bonds and other securities I couldn't remember, much less explain, none of which did especially well. The Ain't had put a sandwich board over his shoulders and an old-fashioned megaphone to his lips. The sign read something like "Ain't Fair What They Done to the Home" on one side and "Weinstein, Peck Lost Half Our Money" on the other. The megaphone treated passersby to a never-flagging harangue in a southern accent about con men bilking charities and fat cats enjoying three-martini lunches off the sweat of little people. The nickname came from the first word of the sign and the paper bag with eye and mouth holes the man always wore over his head, like the New Orleans Saints fans a few years back.

I said, "Why is he still a problem to you?"

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Weinstein came back from the view. "You mean because he's dead?"

"Right. He started picketing—what, Monday?"

"Correct."

"Next night he turns up in a vacant lot near the shelter, face in a makeshift campfire. No more picketing, no more problem."

"Except for one." Weinstein opened a drawer, pulled out copies of the *Globe* and the *Herald,* and spread them on his desk. "I take it you've not seen Wednesday's papers?"

"No. I was in New York yesterday."

"They can be easily summarized. The innuendo is that we had the poor wretch killed."

"You're kidding."

The tired sigh again. "Read."

I did. Weinstein was right about the slant of the stories.

He said, "Over the last twenty-four hours I've received no fewer than ten calls, some of them from clients of forty years' standing. Their message was less veiled than those news accounts."

"Meaning they're taking their business elsewhere."

"Unless this matter is resolved quickly and we are exonerated completely."

"Which is where I come in."

"Precisely."

"Any suggestions on where I should start?"

"The broker involved, Jancy Bickles, is waiting to see you in our conference room. Her brother, Truman, is the man who runs Bed-Down."

"Which is how Weinstein, Peck got the account."

"Correct. You may also want to speak with her supervisor, Joel Comerford."

"I'd rather see her first."

"Probably easier for you in any case. Joel's out with the flu."

"A problem of this magnitude, maybe he could come in sick."

A shake of the head. "No. No, I have a strict rule about that. No one comes in sick, or everyone comes down sick. You can see Joel at his condo."

Apparently Weinstein's concern about health didn't extend to independent contractors like me. I got Comerford's address on Beacon Hill and finished up the details of retainer and billing.

I said, "Anything else?"

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Weinstein tented his fingers on the desk over the yacht, as if he were building it a boathouse with a cathedral ceiling. "How soon before you'll be back to me?"

"Hard to say."

The tired sigh accompanied me out of the office.

2.

"So you're a private investigator."

Jancy Bickles looked up at me, trying to be light rather than flirty. The big brown eyes and broad smile tried hard, but her voice wasn't in it and that tends to mean the heart isn't either. About five five in business heels and blue suit, her hair was worn short but not scalped. Two small hoop earrings pierced each lower lobe. The black face had the kind of sharp features that needed no makeup to bring them out. As soon as she turned off the smile, the features took a sad cast, as though she'd just done her best to cheer the mourners on the receiving line of a funeral.

I sat down on the chair opposite her across the conference table and took out a pad. "B-I-C-K-L-E-S."

"That's right. And 'Jancy' with a 'J,' not an 'N.' "

Bickles had the speaking voice of a network anchorwoman. "I've never seen that spelling before. Where are you from?"

"Alabama, originally, near the Gulf Coast. Just like my brother."

Bickles laid out the last sentence very evenly.

I wrote "ALA" on my pad. "Meaning, how come I'm asking you questions I already know the answers to?"

"For starters."

"Sometimes when I start an interview, lollipop questions get the ball rolling."

The smile came back, a little jaded. "Bull."

I folded up the pad. "Why do I get the feeling you've dropped a syllable since moving north?"

"Mr. Cuddy, why don't I just go through everything I know for you. Then you can ask me real questions and save both of us some time."

"Fine."

She waited a moment, then took a deep breath. "First, I had nothing to do with that man's death."

"That's fine, too."

Bickles regarded me a moment before continuing. "Second, neither did my brother."

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"Truman."

"Truman."

"Okay."

"Third, that man—have they identified him yet?"

"Not according to the papers."

"Third, that man was vile. I'm not going to pretend I'm sorry he's dead, though burning like that must be a horrible way to die. He was an ignorant and offensive cracker."

I waited, but she seemed to have made the points that mattered to her. "By 'cracker,' do you mean a southerner in general or a Georgian in particular?"

"I mean that old southern attitude, like he was right because he was white, and I wasn't because I'm not."

"How did your brother come to invest with you?"

Bickles regarded me again, a woman who thought about her answers before she gave them. "Same way as everywhere else, Mr. Cuddy. He had money to put to work and a relative in the business."

"Was your brother the only one from the shelter who talked with you?"

"Yes. Oh, he has a board and all. But most of the people on it just like the way it sounds on their resume, like they're involved with the plight of the homeless. They don't really want to know about things."

"So your brother gave you—what, about two hundred thousand?"

"Two hundred fifteen thousand." The even voice again.

"And you put it where?"

"Into small-company growth stocks and high-yield corporate bonds."

"Fliers and junk."

Bickles bristled. "No, Mr. Cuddy. Growth investments and high-yield income instruments that gave Bed-Down a fighting chance to be able to increase the value of its endowment while maybe, just *maybe*, allowing my brother the chance to earn a living wage running the place."

"Your brother knew what he was putting the shelter's money into?"

"He did. My supervisor and I explained it to Truman in this very room."

"Joel Comerford."

"Yes."

"Do you know anything at all about the dead man?"

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"No. All I know is that he parked himself outside our building here on Monday and started parading up and down the sidewalk with those stupid signs and bullhorn—"

"On TV it looked like a megaphone."

Bickles waved her hand. "Whatever. He'd rant and rave and save his best for when he saw me."

"He knew you?"

The jaded smile. "Weinstein, Peck is progressive, Mr. Cuddy. In fact, it's a damned good place to work. But how many black female brokers you figure even a progressive small house has coming in the doors downstairs?"

The accent broke through the polish a little. "What did the man say to you?"

"He went on about how I'd put the shelter's money into uranium mines and the Brooklyn Bridge. About how I should never have taken on so much money so young. About how I should have gotten other people to oversee my work. All the cute little code words for racism and sexism."

"Did anybody approve your investments?"

The bristling again. "Yes. Joel signed off on all the originals, and I got oral approval of every trade thereafter. You have to understand, Mr. Cuddy, I handled my brother's account more carefully than any of the others I service here. I knew we were in some long-shot bets, and I wasn't about to have my neck on the line alone."

"How did your brother take the losses?"

"The losses?"

"On the investments."

"Oh. He understood. He knew things were a little risky, and they still might turn around."

"You said the dead man started picketing on Monday."

"Right. Saw him the first time on Monday morning coming to work."

"He died sometime Tuesday night."

Jaded smile. "So I've heard."

"Mind sharing with me where you were on Tuesday?"

No bristling this time, just the even voice. "My brother came over to my apartment for dinner."

"And where is that?"

"My apartment? Back Bay."

Less than a mile from where the body was found. "When did he arrive?"

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"Around seven."

"Just the two of you?"

"Yes."

"When did he leave?"

"He stayed for the ten o'clock news on Channel 56. That's when he saw the story about the man dying."

" 'He saw'?"

"What?"

"You weren't watching television together?"

"No. I was in the kitchen, getting dessert ready. Truman called me into the living room."

"What name did Truman use for the man?"

"Same as everybody."

" 'The Ain't'?"

Still the even voice. "That's right."

"Ms. Bickles, did you tell your brother about The Ain't bothering you?"

"None of your damned business."

3.

I knocked on the door and heard a lilting female voice say, "Just one sec."

Two bolts were thrown, and the wide six-panel swung inward. The woman opening it was Kewpie-doll pretty, in her late twenties, with blond hair piled up in a bun on top of her head. She was wearing a sweatshirt and sweatpants and holding a dust rag between manicured fingers.

I said, "I'm sorry. I was looking for Joel Comerford."

"Hey, come on in. I'm just cleaning off some of the stuff from the den." She closed and bolted the door behind me. "Joel? Hey, Joel?"

She turned back to me. "He's up there now, working on his computer. How he can stand the smell of that fresh paint, I'll never know. It drives me out of the place. I'll get him."

The woman turned away and started down the hall, putting on her brakes almost comically, then spinning and coming back to me like a little girl. "Gee, where are my manners. I'm Danielle, Joel's wife."

"John Cuddy."

We shook, and off she went again. A woman who got a little less attractive, but a little nicer, the more you talked with her. I wandered away from the door, seeing a living room that looked a bit

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overfurnished. Near the rear windows, a bunch of newspapers were spread on the floor, and some Windex and paper towels were sitting on the sill. On the newspapers were prints and photos and documents in frames.

Danielle came back, the sound of thumping feet on an internal staircase behind her. She said, "Don't mind the mess, I just hate to lose the chance to clean everything up right." She went past me and held up one of the frames. Mounted behind the glass was a diploma. The only words I could make out were "Duke University" and "Joel D. Comerford."

Danielle said proudly, "The Harvard of the South."

A man's voice behind me said, "Danielle, now put that down and stop boring the man."

The voice had more than a trace of the South to it. The man it belonged to looked to be in his mid-forties, wearing khaki slacks, a turtleneck sweater, and a pair of Top-Siders. His hair was blond, too, thinning but gamely styled and combed. He carried a pipe by the bowl in his left hand, and a legal pad in his right. He shifted the pad to the pipe hand to shake with me.

"Charles said you might be by. If you can stand the smell of paint, we'll leave Danielle to her spring cleaning and sit up in the den."

"That sounds good."

Comerford sniffled and coughed a little. "Coffee?"

"No, thank you."

"Danielle, the phone rings, how about you let the tape take it, okay?"

"Okay." She still seemed a bit put down about the "boring" remark.

I followed Comerford up a circular staircase that would have fit in a narrow lighthouse to a second-floor landing with three doors off it. Two were closed, and I guessed they were to bedroom and bath. The third was open, the doorway filled by a partial view of the Charles River over the tops of Mary Poppins townhouses on the downslope of Beacon Hill.

Comerford said, "Always love that view from the open door."

Containing only a massive desk and two red leather chairs, the den gave the impression of having been stripped for the paint job. The nails were in the walls, masking tape still running along some woodwork and window trim.

I said, "You doing over the whole apartment?"

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"No, no." Comerford motioned me to take a seat on one of the chairs while he moved behind the desk and fiddled with some buttons on a computer and modem hookup on top of it. "I picked up a flu bug, and Charles has a strict rule—almost an obsession—about us coming to work with germs." A soft chuckle. "I'm hoping to sneak in for a few hours this afternoon, but fortunately I can stay hooked to the office with this system and still have time to get to things that need doing." Comerford gestured with his pipe. "And this habit smokes up the walls and ceiling like you wouldn't believe."

I could believe it.

Comerford sank into his chair and sniffled and coughed again. "Charles only reached me as you were coming in the door downstairs. Seems you're going to look into this Ain't character's death for us?"

"That's right."

"How can I help you?"

"When was the first time you saw him?"

"First and only time was Monday. I got in to work early, opened a window to get some air, and heard him from the street. He was out in front of the building, yelling away into that cheerleader thing. I thought he was just your usual garden variety nutcase till I heard what he was saying, then saw him light into Jancy as she arrived for work."

"He was there Tuesday, too, right?"

"Far as I know. He wasn't there when I went home sick on Monday afternoon. I thought he was gone for good, truth to tell. Just a temporary thing, you know? I think he would have been, if it weren't for the media circus."

"You figure the attention brought him back?"

"Sure, why not? Homeless guy, he hasn't got anything better to do. I'm telling you, they hadn't put him on the air, he's gone in another day, maybe two, max. But make him a star, and . . ." Comerford shrugged.

"He make any threats to anybody?"

"Threats? Not that I saw. He did seem pretty rough—crude, I mean."

"How did you come to be involved in the investments Jancy Bickles made for her brother?"

"Same way I always am. Charles assigned her to me when he took Jancy on, us both being from the South and all. Charles, he's a good man, but he kind of figures there's no difference between Alabama

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and North Carolina, when there's all the difference in the world. But Jancy is sharp as a tack, no 'token' black in any way. She passed everything by me on her brother's portfolio, and I approved all her decisions."

"Does that mean you agreed with them?"

"What, her decisions, you mean?"

"Yes."

Comerford thought about it. "Yes, in terms of the kinds of investments. Would I have picked the same identical stocks and bonds? Maybe not, but there wouldn't have been a big difference."

"In what happened to the shelter's nest egg, you mean?"

Comerford's jaw clenched, then relaxed. "Mr. Cuddy, that brother of hers came in with a goal. His goal was to grow his money and pay his bills, all at the same time. Jancy and I explained to him everything we could think of, and he understood it all. Now, I'm not saying he's as sophisticated as Jancy. But he knew it was no guts, no glory time."

"You ever been to the shelter?"

"No, but if you want to go there, I can call Truman, and he can give you directions."

"Don't trouble. One other thing?"

"Sure."

"When The Ain't was speaking through the megaphone, could you pick up his accent?"

Comerford worked his jaw again. "You know, I've been thinking on that, figuring the cops or somebody might ask. I'm not sure now, what with that megaphone distorting things, but I'd have to say . . . L.A.?"

"Los Angeles?"

Comerford shook his head. "Lower Alabama."

We watched each other before I thanked him and he walked me down and out of the condo.

4.

Detective Sergeant Bonnie Cross was lost in the homicide file in front of her. She was wearing a padded blazer across shoulders wide enough to make her body type "sturdy." Her brown hair was parted in the middle and tied back as though she hadn't had time to wash it that morning.

I said, "Sergeant?"

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The look in her eyes wasn't half as telling as the Styrofoam cup in her left hand. The tarry dregs at the bottom had dried so thoroughly that there was no leak as she crushed the cup in her fist.

"Cuddy. What do you want?"

"Have I come at a bad time?"

"There hasn't been a good time since my senior prom. What?"

"The Ain't thing."

She started to mouth the words, then nodded. "Right, right. It's one of mine. What's your interest?"

I told her.

"Good luck to you and to them."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean Tuesday about eight P.M. the uniforms get flagged down by an elderly couple walking their dog. The dog's the size of a Shetland pony, which is what gave them the courage to be out in that neighborhood at night. The uniforms respond and find this white male in a vacant lot, facedown in the campfire, empty bottle of rye next to him. A marshmallow would have looked better."

"Photos?"

"Haven't got them yet."

"No rush on this one?"

"Look, Cuddy, there are three ways the homeless tend to leave us. One, they get drunk and freeze to death in a doorway. Two, they get drunk, fall asleep in that doorway, and slide down so they drive their chin to their chest and close off the windpipe. Three, they get drunk, fall asleep—"

"And burn themselves to death."

"Cigarette, Sterno, this guy a campfire."

"Identification?"

"Not yet and not likely."

"What about prints?"

"Hands went in, too."

"How's that?"

"We figure he was sitting over the fire, pitched forward, and face and both hands went into the coals."

"Wiping out facial features and fingerprints both."

"Right."

"Seems a little . . . comprehensive, don't you think?"

"Not really. Nobody touched his teeth."

"So if you had an idea of a name, you could maybe check his dental charts."

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"Medical examiner said the fillings were old but looked military. Don't ask me how he can know that because I don't like even thinking about dentists, myself."

"Anything at all to trace the body?"

"M.E. found some kind of injury to the left cheekbone and the skull in front of the left ear. Thought it might have been shrapnel. Probably disfiguring unless the guy had a lot of cosmetic surgery."

I thought about the paper bag the dead man wore.

Cross said, "That it?"

"How about time of death?"

"The fire and the cold screw that up some, but he was last seen alive leaving that shelter he slept in at about five P.M."

"Who saw him?"

"Truman Bickles, guy who runs the place."

"How about his effects?"

"The guy was found in a blue parka, fatigue pants, and combat boots, all right? When we realized he was this Ain't character, I went to the shelter—what's it called?"

"Bed-Down."

"Bed-Down, yeah. Ought to be able to remember that. Anyway, I went through his stuff. Just the signs he wore and this loudspeaker he made out of rolled cardboard and twine."

"That's all?"

"No. No, Cuddy, that wasn't all. There were three pairs of briefs, soiled. There were two pairs of socks, holey. There were a couple of stories from the papers about him and the shelter's money your client lost for them. There was no secret diary or message in milk. Hell, we don't even think the guy was done, unless you've got something more than what I've heard."

"I don't."

"Great. You do, call first. No need to come all the way in next time."

"It's been a pleasure, Cross."

"You'll excuse me, I don't like to start lying so early in the day."

5.

The entryway was in an alley, the reception desk an imposing counter. Next to the counter was a solid, scuffed metal door. Above the counter was a thick Plexiglas shield, scratched and stained by God knows what. The immediate impression was that somebody had

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constructed a blockade, but the man standing behind the counter looked to be blockade enough to me.

At six two, two forty, Truman Bickles had been a middle linebacker for the Pats. He'd had a few good seasons before a bad knee made him yesterday's hero. He appeared a bit chunkier than two forty right now, his gut straining against the Nike training pants and long-sleeved T-shirt with pen pocket.

I shoved my ID under the glass. Bickles glanced at it, then pushed a button on his side of the counter that caused the door to buzz and let me come through.

"My name's Truman Bickles."

The voice rumbled around the enclosure. Instead of offering me his hand, Bickles turned and walked me over to some gutsprung chairs around a battered metal desk with a black dial phone. Its receiver looked as though it had been used to drive nails.

We took facing chairs, Bickles's eyebrows arching just a little as he said, "My sister told me you might come calling."

"I thought she might."

"What do you want to be messing around with a dead man for?"

"I don't, especially. I just need to find out why he's dead."

Bickles chewed on that a minute. "Man broke the pledge, the demon rum did him in."

"You believe that?"

"It's what happened lessen somebody can tell me something different."

"You have a name for this guy?"

"Uh-unh. Man wants to come to my shelter, he don't have to leave no name. He just have to be sober and stay sober."

"You ever know this man to fall off the wagon before?"

Bickles did some more chewing. "No."

"When did he first get here?"

"About two, maybe three weeks back."

"Would your records show it?"

"Un-unh. I just keep a head count, I don't register the men like they was in a hotel."

"You ever see this guy without the bag on his head?"

Bickles's eyes narrowed. "No."

"Did anybody else?"

The big man squirmed, a real test for the chair he was in. "One time, last week, one of the other men and him got into a tussle."

"Over what?"

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"Other man, he pulled The Ain't's bag off. I don't allow no fighting here, but by the time I broke them up, The Ain't had his bag back on and didn't give me no more trouble."

"I'd like to speak to this other man and anybody else who knew The Ain't."

The eyes narrowed some more. "Don't know about that."

"What do you mean?"

"Can't see that this thing's done me no good so far. Don't see it getting no better if I let you poke around the men."

I nodded. "Since this thing hit the fan, how're your contributions holding up?"

Bickles squirmed again. I thought I heard a rivet pop in the chair frame.

He said, "Contributions come in irregular. No set pattern to them."

"Fine. Then I just hang around outside, wait for your guys to come in or go out, and offer them twenty to talk with me for a while."

Bickles snorted. "You know what they do with that money."

"I know. I don't like it, and I don't want to be part of it. But either I get my information in here for free or I'll have to give out bottle money to people who don't need it."

"Oh, they need it all right. They just can't take it."

I'd made my argument, so I sat back.

Bickles chewed a little more, and then a little more again before saying, "I opened this place account of I thought a man should have a place to go when things are tough. My sister, she gave me a place to stay when I got waived. That meant something to me, so I give her my business here. Things didn't work out right, somehow. I knew why, I wouldn't have needed her in the first place. But this thing's been bad for the shelter, bad for her, and bad for me. I don't want it to be bad any longer than it has to be."

I bided my time.

Bickles put his hands on the arms of his chair and heaved himself up. "You want to start with his friends or the guy in the tussle?"

"Friends first. One other thing?"

"What?"

"When you spoke with The Ain't, could you tell where he was from?"

"From? You mean like, originally?"

"Yes. Based on his accent, maybe?"

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Bickles shook his big head slowly, left to right. "Never been no good at accents."

6.

"Friend?"

"So I've heard, Maury."

"Well, now, son, I'm not certain The Ain't had what you'd call a friend."

Truman Bickles had lent me the use of the cramped office and went looking for people I might want to see. Maury was the first.

He sat across from me, a skinny parody of a Red Skelton sketch. Black formal hat with chunks missing from the brim, a seagull feather stuck like a sore thumb in the band. Three-day growth of beard, mostly white, and a half-dozen teeth, mostly yellow. Maury wore gloves, even though it was warm in the room, and held an unlit cigar stub between index and middle finger on his right hand.

I said, "If you weren't friends, what were you?"

"Acquaintances, at most." Maury gestured with the cigar butt. "Erstwhile roommates. The Ain't enjoyed the bunk nearest the cellar window, you see, and mine was across from his. The Ain't was quite proud of that window, though he spent little enough time in the room."

"Where did he spend his time?"

A sweeping gesture. "The great outdoors, son. Like most of us, The Ain't preferred the wonders of nature to the blunders of man. Except for a dry bed and some hot water, of course."

"You never got a name from him?"

"No. No, but if I had, I'm sure it would have been worthless."

"I don't get you."

"I'm sure any name he would have given me would have been an alias."

"Why?"

Maury stuck the cigar stub in the corner of his mouth. "Well, The Ain't was always holding forth about con men, how some people always conned their way through life, when in fact he himself was running a bit of a game."

"Like wearing the bag over his head?"

"Perhaps. But I mean more his demeanor. When other people were around, he'd come on strong. The good old boy, with sour-mash grammar and so forth. Then when we'd converse alone, he sounded

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like a college man, and believe me, that you cannot fake, at least not with me."

"The southern accent was a put-on?"

"No, son. No, he had an accent all right, from what part of the South I couldn't guess. But he could speak the queen's English when it suited him, and he put on the hillbilly aspect when he wanted."

"Ever talk with you about his past life?"

"No, he didn't. But then, if he had, I would have thought he was exaggerating—wait a minute, now. He did talk about 'Old Bro.' "

"His brother?"

"I thought as much, but it was never very specific. Just, 'Old Bro is running a game on life,' 'Old Bro isn't playing square.' That sort of thing. Once The Ain't got onto a topic, he never got off it. Stubborn that way."

In Vietnam, "bro" was what one black soldier might call another. "Could he have meant some friend?"

Maury took the cigar from his mouth and put it in a breast pocket. "As I said, The Ain't really didn't have what you'd call a friend."

"What if I don't feel like talking with you?"

"Then you're free to leave, Julio."

"Freedom. That's a nice word, you know it? Fighting I done for freedom, look where it leave me."

Julio tried to cross his arms. Barrel-chested and sliding to fat around the beltline, he couldn't quite manage it, the hands not tucking into the elbows. He had a dark head and a fringe of hair like a tonsured monk that hung low in the back. The burning eyes were the most animated thing about him.

I said, "Was The Ain't in Vietnam, too?"

"Yeah. That's how his face got messed up."

I stopped. "You saw him?"

"I see him every day, man."

"I mean, you saw his face without the bag over it."

"Oh. No, man. What I mean is, he tell me he's walking point one day in the bush, he hits a tripwire and knows it, so he does a dive, but some of the mine, it catch him in the face, mess it up."

"He ever mention what unit he was with?"

"Just that he was army."

"Where he was in-country?"

"Never talked about it much. Never talked a whole lot about anything, 'cept for the demons."

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"The demons?"

"Yeah. I was here one day, he was sleeping over in his bunk by the window there? Well, he's having this nightmare or something, man, so I go over, shake him some. He come out of it, said thanks, the demons was after me, and they was all wearing blue."

"Blue, the color?"

"I guess so."

I thought about it. In Vietnam, the North Vietnamese regulars wore blue uniforms. "Could he have meant NVA?"

"Don't know, man. Full tour in-country, and I never seen an NVA. Just seen this bro' and that get cut down and blown up."

I stared at him.

Julio said, "Fighting for freedom, you know it?"

"He was a son of a bitch."

"How do you mean, Teddy?"

"How do I mean? The hell does 'son of a bitch' mean to you?"

Teddy of the tussle thought he was a tough guy. You could see it in the broken nose and scarred brow and home-inked tattoos on his forearms. The kind of guy who bullied his way through life, whining every step of the way.

I said, "What did you two fight over?"

"Wasn't a real fight. I'd have kicked his butt, Tru hadn't pulled me off him."

"What was the beef?"

"Aw, he was always wearing that stupid bag, like he was some kind of serial killer or something. *Halloween Five—The Ain't,* get me?"

"Go on."

"Well, I wasn't the only one he pissed off—he was stubborn as a mule—but I was the only one with the guts to yank his bag off."

"And what happened?"

"He went nuts, coming after me. Must have had some time in the army or something, 'cause he knew how to hit. But he didn't have a chance against me."

"You saw his face, then?"

"Yeah, I saw it. All ugly, big piece of it missing on the left side. Kind of threw me at first."

"You notice the color of his eyes?"

"You kidding me or what?"

"How about hair?"

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"Dirty, all matted down from being under that bag all the time."
"Color?"
"Looked brown, I suppose."
"He say anything to you?"
"What, about his hair?"
"About anything."
"Just kept yelling at me, 'What'd you do that for?' get me?"
"You answer him back?"
"Yeah. Yeah, sure I did. I said, 'At least with that face, they won't have any trouble identifying you.' "
I paused. "Did he say anything else?"
"Yeah. He said, 'Charlie taught me how to do that.' "
In Vietnam, we called the NVA "Charles," the Vietcong "Charlie."
Teddy said, "What are you looking at?"
"The Ain't said 'Charlie'?"
"Yeah."
"Not 'Charles.' "
"Charles? The hell knows anybody called Charles?"
I did. The man who hired me.

7.

For a late lunch, I grabbed a takeout pastrami sandwich and went back to my office with its four walls. The two windows overlook the Park Street subway station; the low roofs below me were dusted with a fine layer of sooty snow. I sat at my desk and ate my sandwich, the pastrami promising to revisit me in the night. Then I started playing solitaire with pages from my pad, hoping some of the things I'd picked up from the interviews would make some sense.

Charles Weinstein was hoping I could stop the flow of clients away from him due to bad publicity and innuendo. Jancy Bickles was sure The Ain't was racist and sexist, and more sure that she'd done right by the shelter's money and that neither she nor her brother Truman had had anything to do with The Ain't's death. Joel Comerford confirmed Jancy on the investments and thought The Ain't might have been from Alabama. Bonnie Cross and her people found no evidence of identity and weren't even sure a homicide had been committed. Truman Bickles seemed to care genuinely about his shelter and the men in it, but could offer no help on The Ain't's identity. Of the other homeless The Ain't knew, Maury thought he was a con man and a college grad, Julio confirmed he'd been in combat in Vietnam, and only Teddy had actually seen his face.

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I shook my head and reshuffled the notes, dealing them out randomly this time. No apparent matches. Shuffle, deal. Nothing again. Shuffle, deal. Zip.

The tenth go-round, I got "Cross: combat boots"; "Julio: walking point/tripwire"; "Teddy: identification/Charlie taught me." In Vietnam, the guys sometimes slid one dog tag onto a bootlace so that if they were badly mangled, there'd be two possibilities for identification. A longer shot than Jancy Bickles's junk bonds, but worth a phone call. Cross was out, so I left a message for her to check the boots for any ID.

I went back to shuffling and dealing. I lost count of the number of hands I dealt before I got "Jancy: Southern accent"; "Maury: con man/Old Bro"; "Julio: demons/blue." Fainter than smoke, till I remembered a comment I hadn't written down, because I hadn't been interviewing the person at the time.

I ran it through in my head, over and over. Then I dialed a number, eventually got the person I'd asked for, and broke the connection. I lifted the receiver again, calling a different number. Getting the person I wanted right away, I asked if I could come over in fifteen minutes. Then I hung up and called Cross again, reaching her this time.

Based on what she'd found, I asked her to join me.

8.

As he came through the door, Joel Comerford tried to cover the shock in his face, but he couldn't quite pull it off. He said, "Danielle, what's going on?"

Bonnie Cross and I stood up from the couch. Danielle had been serving us afternoon coffee and tea and little biscuits, and couldn't quite see the reason for her husband being rude.

"Joel, this is Detective Cross. And you remember Mr. Cuddy."

Comerford clamped down on something rising in his throat and said, "*Detective* Cross?"

Cross said, "Detective Sergeant, actually."

Danielle said, "Oh, I'm sorry."

Cross said, "No need to be."

Danielle turned to her husband. "Was everything all right at the office?"

Comerford worked his mouth a little, then put on a smile. "Danielle, could you excuse us for a minute?"

"But Joel, I'm just—"

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"Honey, maybe go upstairs for a while?"

"But that paint smell is still so strong—"

"Then take a walk, okay?"

Danielle stopped dead at the edge in his voice. She got very pale, then said, "Okay," and went out through the front door of the condo.

Comerford waited until the door closed, then said, "What is this?"

Cross read him his rights. Comerford swallowed twice, then said he understood them, taking a wing chair in the living room.

Cross sat back on the couch and turned to me. "Go ahead."

I said, "Your wife was kind enough to show us the photos you had to take down in the den when you repainted it."

Comerford didn't say anything.

"You started the paint job Tuesday afternoon. She said the smell was so strong it drove her out. For dinner and a movie. That gave you time to slip out and go visiting." I held up one of the framed photos, showing Comerford and a very similar other man with blond hair. "Time to go visit your brother Joel, who was 'killed' in Vietnam."

Nothing.

"Such terrible luck for you. Twenty years ago, your brother comes back from the war, disfigured, maybe disillusioned. Chucking his college education, Joel goes on the sauce, you lose track of him. Then you decide, 'Hey, that great education he got and I didn't? Why not cash in on it?' So you take his diploma and you take his name."

"You can't prove any of this."

"Because we can't identify the body?"

Comerford started to reply, then shook his head.

I said, "You came north, to avoid most of the Blue Devil alums of Duke, one of whom might notice you're not your brother. You attracted a beautiful wife, got a great job. Everything is coming up roses until that incredible piece of bad luck. Joel ends up at the shelter whose investment account your firm loses money for."

Comerford said, "Those investments were all—"

"—they probably were all good risks. But that's not the point, is it? Some people at the shelter who knew your brother said he was stubborn, that once he got onto something, he stuck with it. Must have been a bad morning for you Monday. A miracle Joel wasn't set up outside to spot you coming to work early. Up in your office, though, you hear his voice through the megaphone. No wonder you got sick. The one man who could destroy your career and your life as a grad of 'the Harvard of the South.' You slipped out somehow,

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maybe when he was taking a break, then stayed home Tuesday while he kept up the parade, giving no impression of ever leaving. You couldn't very well stay home sick until he got tired of picketing, because you knew he might never get tired."

"Ridiculous."

"So you paint the den on Tuesday to get rid of your wife and to have a reason for no photos on the wall in case the police come by to speak to you. You slip out of the condo after she does. You buy a bottle, maybe as a peace offering to your brother, maybe as just a prop for physical evidence. You go over to Bed-Down, wait till you spot him coming or going. Maybe you even tried to talk sense to him?"

Comerford flushed.

"Maybe you tried to get him to see things your way. Somehow I don't think he was amenable to an amicable settlement. Somehow I think he liked the idea of being the gadfly for the money you helped lose for his shelter. Maybe he thought of a new slogan for the sandwich board: 'My Brother Stole My Name and Our Money.' "

"Stop it!"

I watched Comerford seethe.

"Wish I could stop. I wish you had. But you didn't. When Joel wouldn't see the light of reason, when he refused the bottle, what did you do? Sucker-punch him? Maybe with the bottle? Then you set up the fire and pushed him in it, dousing him with the booze as accelerant. To burn off the face that was so like yours, to burn off the fingerprints that would be on file with the army. Tell me, did he wake up? Did he start to come to and—"

"I told you to stop it! This is my home, I can tell you to get out!"

"You still think we can't make the identification stick?"

"No."

"We can make it stick. We have your brother's dog tag."

Comerford's eyes bulged.

"He kept it in his boot, between the heel and the sole. The tag will let the police access dental records. His teeth will tell us who he is, and your fingerprints won't match the ones of 'Joel D. Comerford' that the army has."

Comerford stared down at his finger pads. Then he brought his hands to his eyes and began to cry into them.

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*Those of you who have subscribed to* EQMM *for many years may recognise the author of this piece, whom we have published under a dozen different names. But because of the special nature of the story, we are saving our introductions for the end, by which time you will already have guessed some things about E. Aldon Canoy . . .*

# THE ADVENTURE OF THE SOLITARY BRIDE

## by E. ALDON CANOY

Of the many adventures which won my amazing friend Hoskell Chomers fame and fortune, no record would be complete without the case which I am about to chronicle. My readers are well-acquainted with Chomers's reticence, which has deprived the world of hearing about the canary trainer, also the fireman's big toe, and the adventure of the third blot. He has, however, unbent enough to suggest that the following case might be published at last, and I hasten to set it down forthwith.

It was during those years when we shared rooms at 221A Krebb Street, and long before I thought I had lost my dear friend forever in his encounter with Professor Marriyot. One clear, frosty morning, I was looking out the window while we waited for our landlady, Mrs. Hounds, to appear with the kippers, bacon, and eggs which began our days with such satisfaction to the inner man.

"Well, Sandwort," said Chomers with a chuckle, from behind his newspaper, "I perceive we are about to have a beautiful visitor of the fair sex."

Used as I am to his astonishing powers, I failed to see how he knew what I saw on the street below, and said so. "Besides," I added, "how can you know that she is coming here?"

"Elementary, my dear Sandwort," he smiled. "You are gazing with a rapt admiration on your face that I am sure no member of the male sex could elicit from you, nor yet an ill-favoured member of

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the female species. Twice I have made some trivial comment to which you were deaf, so absorbed are you in the object of your scrutiny. As to how I know she is coming here, since your attention has been riveted to one spot for quite three minutes, then undoubtedly the lady has not moved. Therefore she is one of the many who, though they seek my assistance, still feel a reticence which keeps them hesitating before the door. In that case, she may be veiled as well, and you are perhaps assuming beauty from a comely figure and proud carriage. However, I am sure that very shortly—"

Before he could finish, the graceful stranger had vanished from my view, and we heard a timid ring of the bell. Almost immediately Mrs. Hounds appeared with a tray from which rose many tempting aromas, and with the announcement that a young lady wished to see Mr. Chomers.

"Show her up, by all means. You might bring another plate and cup as well, in case she has not breakfasted."

Thus it was that very shortly Lady Treiboris stood before us. Removing her veil, she introduced herself, and was indeed as beautiful as Chomers rightly guessed that I had imagined, with deep violet eyes that at the moment were sorely troubled, and sleek dark hair.

"Well, Madam, will you join me and my friend Sandwort for breakfast? No? A cup of coffee then? It is a chilly morning. Pray be seated, and tell us how we may serve you. Apart from the fact that you are in a state of unusual agitation, newly married or worried about your marriage, perhaps both, have recently come from the southern portion of America but are trying to adapt to our British ways, have come up from the country this morning, and that your bridegroom is wealthy and of an old and titled family, I know nothing."

The lady gasped, then said, "You seem to know a great deal. Apparently you have heard something of me, though I cannot imagine how."

"No, Madam, I have not had the pleasure of knowing about you till you yourself appeared. What I state are simple deductions based on observation. For example, your agitation is apparent from the fact that the gloves you have just removed do not match—one is brown and the other black—though you are otherwise fastidiously attired. A shock, then, presumably occurring after dressing, that led to your hastily snatching up gloves as you decided to consult me. From the way you are twisting your wedding ring, I deduce that you are either unused to it, therefore newly wed, or worried about your marriage. Both would be quite within the realm of probability

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when a lovely young matron comes alone to consult me. Your speech reflects American accents, with a flavouring of the southern dialect. I have written a small monograph on the subject."

"But how could you know I am trying—as indeed I am—to adapt to your country?"

"Many English-speaking foreigners do not alter their speech by one iota, even after years in another land. Yet I heard you attempting to replace American pronunciations with British ones."

"But my husband's wealth and position?"

"Easily inferred from the ostensible value of your engagement and wedding rings, the one new, the other with old-fashioned setting and crest.

"Finally, only in the country could you have gotten mud upon your boots today, for we have a hard frost here in London."

"Oh," she murmured, "at first it seemed that you were quite brilliant."

"And now it does not," Chomers said drily. "I must cease to explain my little deductions.

"Now," he added briskly, "do tell us what is troubling you so."

"My husband has disappeared," she blurted out. Tears sprang to her eyes, to which she applied a dainty handkerchief. "We *are* newly married, and I just can't understand it."

Chomers reached for a red volume from among his reference books. "Let us see," he said, opening it upon his knee, "Treiboris. Ah, yes. Your aristocratic bridgegroom's full name is Craig Adomcort Treiboris. Hum. Apart from the fact that he is indeed of an old and honoured family, I see little here that is instructive. When did you discover him missing?"

"Yesterday morning," she answered promptly. "When I arose, I discovered that he hadn't been to bed at all. I hurried downstairs, and questioned the butler, Heurlbett. He has been with the family for years, and his ancestors before him, and I would suppose him to be absolutely trustworthy. He informed me that my husband had been called away on urgent business in the north, but that I should hear from him shortly. I thought it strange that he had made no mention of this to me, nor did he come to bid me goodbye before starting off, but as we have barely begun our married life, I do not know his ways.

"I would still be at home, impatiently awaiting his return, rather than seeking you out, were it not for some rather strange, though apparently trivial, occurrences."

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"Ah!" exclaimed Chomers, "pray continue."

"I wandered into the drawing room before breakfast, and found there a sheet of paper with arrangements of playing cards upon it. I can't conceive how it came to be there; it surely wasn't there the night before. I might still have dismissed it as of no importance had not Heurlbett entered at that moment and seemed quite anxious to take the paper from me. Normally he is as imperturbable as his kind generally are, yet he all but snatched the paper from my hand. His words seemed ordinary enough. He said, 'Beg pardon, my lady, the maids have been careless; allow me to dispose of that,' but I had the strong impression that he felt an urgent need to have that paper. So much so that I jotted down what I had seen, though I gave up the paper meekly enough. Fortunately, I have a photographic mind. This is how it looked."

K♣7♥J♥10♦

J♥K♣A♣10♥Q♥J♠

4♣10♣6♣Q♥K♣10♣10♠2♣6♣8♣3♣10♣Q♠

"A pretty puzzle," Chomers said approvingly, with the gleam in his eyes I knew so well. "Anything else?"

"Yes. Through the window I saw a man slinking toward the stables. He was edging by the bushes, and I caught but scant glimpses, but I could see that he was clad in workman's clothing, was rather a young man, and had a weak chin, making him look rather ferrety. I hurried out to the stables, but he was nowhere in sight. When I asked O'Mertogh, the groom, about him, he said there was not and never had been any such person working about the place. I tackled Heurlbett too, but he insisted I must have been mistaken.

"You may imagine I passed an uneasy twenty-four hours, wondering if something underhanded were going forward, or if I were merely overwrought. If something *were* amiss, I don't see why the servants wouldn't urge a report to the police, and I cannot imagine that they have harmed their master, for they seem most loyal and devoted.

"Still, when I came down this morning, rather early, for I had passed a troubled night, and found yet another piece of paper covered with playing cards, my anxieties mounted afresh. When I es-

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pied the same ferrety fellow out by the bushes, I became frightened and determined to seek your help without further delay."

"Have you that second sheet of paper?"

"Yes, I snatched it up before I should be found with it, and brought it along. Here it is."

"Excellent!" Chomers rubbed his hands together and his eyes sparkled. "Let's take a look."

Here is the paper we scanned, to our bafflement.

K♣6♣A♥10♦7♣10♣10♣6♠J♥10♣10♣6♠

4♣7♥6♥9♣7♥6♠7♣10♣Q♥Q♥10♣J♠J♣7♥10♠6♥7♥2♠

A♣Q♠K♣6♣9♦7♣10♣Q♥Q♥10♣10♠7♣10♦9♣7♥10♥6♦

"Now," Chomers said, "a few questions to be sure I understand the situation correctly. Had there been a quarrel of any kind between you and your husband?"

"Not at all," she assured us earnestly. "He is a most wonderful and loving man, and we have been as happy and devoted as two love birds. He has been taking such pride and pleasure in familiarizing me with his estate. He is a proud man at all events, but I see no harm in that."

"Then he is also proud of his personal appearance?"

"Exceedingly so. He really is inclined to vanity. He is a striking figure, with a handsome face and bearing. He takes particular pride in his fine head of hair and his beard, which is full and glossy, and trimmed just so. As I have often told him, it was his glorious appearance which first drew me to him. Of course, now that I know him, there are a thousand better reasons for loving him."

"Is vanity the only fault of this paragon?"

"I believe he is somewhat impulsive and hasty in his decisions, but the soul of kindness and consideration."

"I see. Did anything unusual occur on the last evening you spent together?"

"Not at all. It was a most ordinary evening. He was going over some papers his estate agent had brought in that day, while I read a book. When I was ready to retire he was still absorbed in his papers, but said he would be along soon. Oh!"

"You have remembered something?"

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"Just after I retired, I did hear some slight commotion. I went out to investigate, and met Heurlbett in the passage. He assured me it was a trivial domestic accident, and that I need not trouble myself. Do you think that has significance?"

"We shall see. Heurlbett seems quite ubiquitous. Now, just one other thing. I take it you have brought no servants of your own to your new home?"

Our fair client was amazed. "However did you know that?"

"I have my methods, Lady Treiboris."

"Well, you are perfectly right. I had a maid when I first came over here, but she missed her homeland and her people, and when I made my decision to settle here permanently she returned across the sea. But, oh! Mr. Chomers, what has become of my darling, and what has my maid to do with it?"

"A great deal, I believe. Now, Lady Treiboris, I beg you to worry no longer, for I am sure all will be well. In fact, if my deductions are correct, we may be able to clear up this business very shortly."

"You don't mean that you know what has happened!"

"Oh, yes. A simple problem, though not without some instructive features. However, I wish to confirm one or two points before I speak. I rather fancy the playing cards can tell us the rest of the story, and I shall study them most carefully. Can you spend the day in London?"

"My husband—we—have a town house, but I believe it is closed up at present. However, I still have the house I leased when I first came, and I can spend the day there."

"Good. Let me have the address, and I should like to know the street and number of the town house as well. It might come in useful. Now, if you would just write a note to the worthy Heurlbett, instructing him to receive us and answer our questions, we will be off to Surrey to test my theory. You shall hear from me before the day is out."

The lady rose to go. "Do you think we should notify the police?"

"It is more than likely that our good friends Streadle and Noggers and their kind would only botch matters. Sandwort and I can handle this case quite adequately. Of course, you have a perfect right to call them in if you wish."

"I am in your hands," the lady stated, "and will do as you advise. I shall wait to hear from you. Good day."

"Of course, Sandwort, it is all clear to you?" Chomers said with a twinkle, after she had left.

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"No," said I. "I must confess I am quite baffled."

"But it is perfectly plain. Consider, for instance, the clue of the butler's attitude."

"But there is apparently nothing amiss in the butler's attitude!"

"Exactly, my dear Sandwort! And now, let us get ready for our journey, for the game is afoot!"

In short order a hansom was hurrying us to Waterloo, and we were soon settled into a compartment heading into the lush green Surrey countryside. Chomers spread out the two papers covered with playing cards upon his knee.

"Come, Sandwort, what do you infer from these?"

"It seems," said I, "like a secret code, a communication between the ferret-faced chap and someone in the house, for both times that Lady Treiboris found these papers, she saw the fellow lurking as well. It seems almost inescapable that the butler is lying, and is in league with this mysterious stranger."

"Excellent, Sandwort! Now to decode the messages."

Without further ado, he produced pencil and paper, furrowed his brow, and set to work.

"Aha!" he cried about half an hour later. "I think there is just time to show you what I have done before we reach our destination.

"I began with the second message, as it is longer and affords more clues. I was hoping for a simple substitution cipher, where each card might stand for a different letter, and I was right. To begin with, you see we have mostly clubs and hearts, with a light sprinkling of diamonds and spades. I thought to try regarding the latter as marking ends of words, which would be consistent with their infrequency. Consider that a deck has fifty-two cards, whereas only twenty-six are needed for the alphabet. Hence two suits suffice, with two left over for word endings, if my theory was correct. I tried arranging the cards from ace to king or deuce to ace, beginning with clubs and going on with hearts, and matching them with the alphabet beginning with *a*, but our code deviser was a bit cannier than that. I then tried some substitutions, and here is what I got. The ten of clubs appears twice as a double letter in the middle of two four-letter words, so is probably *o* or *e*. Now here is a ten of diamonds—a possible word ending, and as diamonds follows clubs, very likely belonging with the club sequence. That makes *e* the more probable for the ten of clubs and diamonds. Further on, we come to two three-letter words with the seven of hearts in the middle. Few three-letter

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words have a consonant as their middle letter, and it is hardly likely there would be two in a row. Now, if we try the seven of hearts as a vowel and look at this word that goes as follows: 4♣, 7♥, 6♥, 9♣, 7♥, 6♥, what does that suggest? Suppose the cards *are* in sequence, though starting with other than ace or deuce. Then the 6♥ would stand for the letter preceding the 7♥ in the alphabet. Trying the 7♥ as a vowel, we have the following possibilities: —az—az, —ih—ih, —on—on, —ut—ut. We omit *e,* which we have already employed. Look at the third one. Does not 'London' leap to the eye? Now we also have the possibility of an orderly sequence being followed. Are there other indications? Yes, we have *d* and *e* as the nine and ten of clubs. This provides two lines of attack. We can arrive at the sequence from the letters we have, or we can continue to deduce substitutions from context. Here is what we have so far:

— — — e/— e e n/— e e n
L o n d o n/— e— — e—/— o —/n o —
— —/— —d/— e— — e—/—e/d o — —

You can easily see more possibilities there. 'Been seen' seems likely for the first line, and we can fill in more *b*s. That suggests 'better' in the second and third lines, with the double letter in the center, giving us *t* and *r*. A little application can give us the rest.

"Now, looking at sequence, what do we have?

| a | b | c | d | e | f | g | h | i | j | k | l | m | n | o | p | q | r | s | t | u | v | w | x | y | z |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 7♣ | | | 9♣ | 10♣ | | | | | | | 4♣ | | 6♥ | 7♥ | | | 10♥ | J♥ | Q♥ | | | | | | |

All is clear, is it not? We can readily fill it in, giving us the complete code, thus:

| a | b | c | d | e | f | g | h | i | j | k | l | m | n | o | p | q | r | s | t | u | v | w | x | y | z |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ♣6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | J | Q | K | A | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | ♥6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | J | Q | K | A | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

"Let us apply this to the first message and see what we get.

hose
shirts
leather jacket

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"What do you make of that, Sandwort?"

"How disappointing!" I cried. "Although you must be right about the code, as words have emerged, here we must have still another code, with these items standing for something of more significance."

Chomers looked at me quizzically. "You may be right. Let us pass on to the next. We have:

have been seen
London better for now
it had better be Dora

"Why," said I in some excitement, "here we have real information. That may be the stranger himself, seen by Lady Treiboris, perhaps fleeing to London in consequence.

"But who is Dora, and what evil designs has he upon her?"

"That will have to wait," said Chomers, "for here is our station. Quick, Sandwort, let us hire a carriage. I wish to make a brief stop to send off two—no, three—telegrams, and then we can proceed to investigate the scene of the disappearance. I think you are right, however, and the trail will lead us back to London. It would be as well to inform ourselves of return trains."

Before long we were drawing up before the beautiful estate of the Treiboris family, an ancient stone building set in gracious grounds. Heurlbett showed us into the drawing room after reading the note from his mistress, and prepared to withdraw.

"One moment!" Chomers said brusquely. The butler paused.

"Tell me, man, quickly!" snapped my friend. "You had the doctor here the other night?"

"Oh, yes, sir. That is—" the man looked momentarily confused. "One of the servants became ill, you understand."

"That's all for now," Chomers said. "We may call upon you again later."

The butler withdrew. I was disappointed that Chomers had not asked him about the ferret-faced man, but doubtless he had his reasons. When the door had closed behind Heurlbett, Chomers, with the animation that characterized him when on the scent, dropped to the floor, examined the carpet minutely with his glass, and generally gave the room a microscopically thorough examination. Finally, he gave a satisfied grunt and rang for the butler.

"Look here," he said, when the servant appeared. "How do you explain this stain upon the carpet?"

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"I couldn't say, sir, I'm sure," the butler replied impassively. "It is not my function to tend this room. That is the job of the parlourmaid, Dora Lampuir."

"Bring her here, then."

"I'm sorry, sir. She has been called away to tend a sick relative."

He hesitated. "Please, sir, I would like to say something. I know her ladyship called you in, and that is quite understandable. But she is not yet familiar with his lordship's habits, and is alarmed quite unnecessarily. He is away on business, as I told her, and often dashes off without notice. Believe me, sir," he continued earnestly, "you would do them both a service to accept that explanation."

"Hum, perhaps," murmured Chomers. "All the same, I shall continue my investigation. Tell O'Mertogh to expect us in a few minutes.

"Look at this stain on the carpet," Chomers exclaimed after the butler had left. "I have examined it with my lens, and it is blood, undoubtedly of recent origin.

"Now, let us go to the stables."

I was feeling both alarm and pity for Lady Treiboris as we crossed the courtyard. The bloodstains suggested sinister possibilities. It seemed, too, that the missing parlourmaid, undoubtedly the Dora of the coded message, had fallen afoul of the villains.

Chomers paused by a well, and threw a pebble into it. It seemed ages before we finally heard a faint splash. "These are deep waters, Sandwort," he cried, "but I believe I have got to the bottom of them."

We entered the stables. The groom was vague, but essentially reiterated what we had been told, that he had never had a man such as Lady Treiboris described working for him, nor, as far as he knew, was there such a person on the gardening staff. Chomers, nonetheless, was determined to examine the stables. In the loft we discovered a pallet of straw.

"There!" said Chomers with satisfaction. "Our man has slept here, but as no personal possessions remain, he has apparently flown. It is time we returned to London."

Chomers said little on the return journey. "You see, do you not," he ventured at one point, "that the accident is the key to the business?" I could get no further explanation from him, and on our return to 221A Krebb Street, he filled his pipe from the Persian slipper and immersed himself in clouds of blue smoke, saying only that all would be explained later. He also ventured some strains upon his violin, but of the case no word would he say.

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As dinnertime approached, caterers appeared and laid a festive table for four. No sooner had they departed than our lovely visitor of the morning was shown up. She eyed the table in some puzzlement, no more than my own.

"I came in response to your message," she said. "But whom else do you expect?"

"Do you wonder? Hark, I hear him now!"

At that moment, a tall, broad-shouldered man with a glossy brown beard strode through our doorway. Lady Treiboris exclaimed and ran to him. Then she hesitated.

"I don't understand," she said with a catch in her voice. "Here you are safe and sound. Why did you leave me without even the barest farewell?"

"Come, sir," Chomers addressed the stranger briskly. "I feel certain you have done your lady an injustice, and she will in truth care none the less for you. I recommend you make a clean breast of the matter, or rather, a clean chin. Off with the beard, and tell her all."

"You may have something there," the gentleman rejoined, and gave a tug at his beard. It came away in his hand, revealing a receding chin.

His wife looked astonished, and then broke into peals of laughter. "I think I begin to understand," said she. "It was *you* whom I saw slinking about. Did you really think, my darling, that I would love you less without your beard? Though it does become you, and you might replace the false one before you explain."

"Mr. Chomers is right," said he, grinning. "I should have had more faith in your love.

"After you retired the other night," he began, "I was making some small adjustment to the chandelier when it slipped, hitting me in the face and giving me a nasty cut on the chin. Heurlbett sent for the doctor, who insisted on shaving off my beloved beard, that he might stitch the cut. You have so often told me how you cherish my looks, and our marriage is so new and untried, that I feared you might be repelled by this weak chin with which the good God furnished me, and care for me no more. My first plan, with the help of Heurlbett, was to camp in the stables till the beard should grow back. We had not yet apprised O'Mertogh of the situation when you questioned him (I heard you from my hiding place), and as you had actually seen me, it seemed risky, as well as inconvenient, to remain.

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"I then decided to go to the town house. Heurlbett was surprisingly slow to take action on that decision. I spoke to him after I saw you drive away this morning, and he, unaccountably, claimed he had not got my message to that effect."

Chomers chuckled. "Your lady took it, though she doesn't know it. She must have snatched up the paper before the butler had a chance to see it. I presume that is a code you worked out with the butler, as a child, for boyish larks. The first message directed him, I don't doubt, to bring you the clothing you required."

"Quite right," smiled Treiboris. "It seemed the most convenient way to communicate with Heurlbett just now without being seen in my shorn condition. I had not expected Lady Treiboris up so early. You seem to know all about it. I was going to wait in London for the beard to grow, and write her a letter to assure her of my continuing devotion and well-being. I got this false beard today, but felt it would not suffice, as it would surely slip when I was asleep. You can imagine my astonishment at receiving a telegram summoning me here. Only the servants knew where I was, and they would never tell."

"It was simplicity itself," said Chomers. "I was quite sure foul play could be ruled out, or the servants would not have gone so serenely about their business without concern for their master's disappearance. (That, my dear Sandwort, is the significance of the clue of the butler's attitude.) I could not believe the tale of business demands any more than your wife, for what truly loving bridegroom would dash off without a farewell to his bride? I briefly considered that your love was merely a pretense, but your lady was quite sure it was genuine. The greater probability was that something had occurred which occasioned your not wanting her to see you. I wondered if your appearance had somehow been adversely affected, and asked if you were vain of your looks. I learned that not only was that the case, but your wife has told you it was your looks that won her affections. When I also learned of the beard of which you are extremely proud, and the mysterious appearance of a weak-chinned 'stranger' communicating with your devoted butler, it was not difficult to deduce a facial cut, or a doctor requiring the beard to be shaved off so that he might treat it. The report of a disturbance after the lady left you, and the bloodstains I discovered, offered corroboration, as did the butler's acknowledgement of the doctor. I reasoned that if you had another house, you would go to it, and

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the second message confirmed that. Dora, the parlourmaid, was, I presume, designated to make it ready."

"Well, you are remarkable," said Treiboris. "I'm glad my wife went to you, for we now have a firmer base than ever to our marriage, thanks to you, and need not be parted any longer besides."

"But, Chomers," said I, "what about Lady Treiboris's maid?"

"Why, it seemed clear that the household servants were in on a conspiracy to hide their master. If she had servants of her own, they would be bound to hear something of it amongst the servants' talk, and being loyal to *her,* would have told her. If such were the case, the theory I was developing would not have held up, and we should have had to look elsewhere.

"And now, it is my hope that you will all join me for this supper I have ordered brought here—the object of my third telegram.

"Besides," he added, as we drew up our chairs, "were there a villain in the case, his name would have revealed him."

"There, Chomers, you are wrong," said I. "There was one character in the case whose name was ostensibly unknown to us. How could you be sure (until you proved he was Lord Treiboris himself) that the skulking, weak-chinned stranger was not named, for instance, Vanilli?"

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I couldn't resist giving Sandwort the last word. I felt he deserved it after patiently playing straight man for so long. What he and Chomers meant was that all the characters' names are anagrams that somehow reveal their roles, yet no character in this story is thus indicated as a villain. ("Vanilli" is an anagram of villain.)

Of course readers recognized the subject of this pastiche, that violin-playing master of deduction, who could only be Sherlock Holmes, with his faithful Dr. Watson, here anagrammed to Hoskell Chomers and Sandwort. (Some of the names lent themselves irresistibly to humorous anagrams.) Nor could I resist Mrs. Hounds for Mrs. Hudson, their unfailing landlady at 221B Baker Street, here rearranged to 221A Krebb Street.

Reference is also made to other old standbys of the Sherlock Holmes stories, the two Scotland Yard detectives he most often outthought, Lestrade and Gregson, here represented as Streadle and Noggers. Professor Moriarty becomes Marriyot. Lady Treiboris—solitary bride, as the title indicates.

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Craig Adomcort Treiboris—aristocratic bridegroom (Chomers actually says, "Your aristocratic bridegroom's full name is . . . ," a dead giveaway.)

Heurlbett—the butler

O'Mertogh—the groom

Dora Lampuir—parlourmaid

All of the above being so, the author, E. Aldon Canoy, obviously stands revealed as the incomparable A. Conan Doyle.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The real author of this story is, of course, someone quite different: a psychologist, writer, mother, and long-time friend of this magazine, Norma Schier. Ms. Schier debuted in *EQMM* in 1965 with the first of her anagram detective stories, "If Hangman Treads." More than a dozen such stories followed over the years and the author came to know editor Fred Dannay well. In 1979, the anagram tales were collected in a volume called *The Anagram Detectives* (Mysterious Press) but in that book there also appeared four new anagram pastiches never subsequently published in *EQMM*. You have just read one. Now that you're warmed up, try your wits on another . . .

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# THE ADVENTURE OF THE BOING! RITUAL

## *by RIF H. LOBSTER*

It is some time since I have recorded the adventures of my brilliant friend, Mooch Sheckls, owing to a slight indisposition on my part which made writing difficult. Having taken up equestrian pursuits, I fell victim to rider's cramp.

However, I have now cut the horses to return to the cackle, and see that several cases await my documentation. One pretty little problem ensued when Mr. Garfunkel was found dead of cyanide poisoning. I have called it the Case of the Blue Garfunkel. Then there were two entirely separate adventures occurring about the same time and involving the athletic sphere. One concerned a Japanese runner who had been an outlaw friar. It is in my notes as the Nippon Tuck race. The other concerned those famous broad-jumping brothers, the Haskervilles, and is called, quite simply, the Bound of the Haskervilles.

But nothing shows my friend's remarkable talents to better advantage than the case I am about to relate. One rainy October afternoon I had stopped for donuts, and was just returning from my rounds to our rooms at 221B Beagl Street, to find Sheckls bent intently over his retorts.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Alimentary, my dear Tweany," he replied. "Trying out a new sauce for our kerpips for tomorrow's breakfast.

"Did you happen to see a mysterious stranger lurking about on the street as you came in?"

"Sheckls!" I cried. "You never cease to amaze me. How did you know?"

"I looked out the window," he dismissed his great powers of observation with an airy wave of the hand. "I observed a widow loitering about as you came by. I have little doubt that she wishes my help."

Together we went to the window.

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"Somehow," I said, "I had the impression it was a man. How can you tell it is a widow?"

"What else, when we can see long black skirts beneath the coat, and black sleeves beneath the coatsleeves. Clearly a woman in mourning."

"Then how do you know she wants your assistance?"

"Actually, Tweany," he said, "I believe she has need of your medical offices as well. Look at that white bandage around her throat. Obviously she has been attacked, thereby incurring a need for both of us. I wouldn't be surprised," he mused thoughtfully, "if the wound had affected the larynx, giving it a basso tone."

"But Sheckls," I remonstrated, "what about the beard?"

"Ah, Tweany, there you have it! A clever ruse to confuse us. But enough of this idle speculation, for there is the bell, and here is Mrs. Sexes to announce our visitor."

After we had settled our mysterious guest comfortably, and ourselves as well, Sheckls gazed thoughtfully at the stranger and tepeed his fingers.

"Now, Madam," he said, "tell us what brings you here. Aside from the fact that you have recently returned from a safari in Africa, I know nothing."

The visitor gaped in astonishment. "Marvelous!" was the murmured response. "But altogether wrong. I have never been out of London in my life." I noticed with a thrill that it was just as Sheckls had predicted. The voice was distinctly bass. "And why do you call me Madam? My name is Father Sprite."

"Come, come!" my friend exclaimed. "Your raincoat is of a type made exclusively in Africa, generally for wear on safari. It is full of holes and tatters, signifying goring and clawing by ferocious African animals. Your bronzed face also indicates recent outdoor activity under a tropic sun.

"As to your sex, I will humor your wish to be called 'Father,' though I suspect a consultation with Dr. Fugue Minds would not be amiss. However, 'Father' Esprit," he added sternly, "you must be completely honest with us in everything else, or we cannot help you."

"Certainly, Mr. Mooch Sheckls," our guest said in a respectfully awed voice. "But this coat is simply a worn-out castoff formerly belonging to one of my parishioners and donated to the Relief box. It is—hem—sometimes necessary for me to redirect some of the

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contributions. Also, I have recently had sunlamp treatments for an acne condition.

"I *am* a priest, whatever you may think, and that is where my problem comes in. Nor," he added hastily, "is it at all the sort of problem you seem to think. For many years I have been offering my little flock a Sunday evening service, which they attend eagerly in their desire to absorb all the spiritual uplift available to them. But for the past few Sundays, my church has stood virtually empty in the evenings, while I have recognized several of my parishioners hurrying into a building across the street—a great many of the women, and men as well. The front is hung with a banner bearing the inscription 'BOING!' Can you get to the bottom of it?"

"You mean, the basement?" asked my friend. Not waiting for a reply, he went on, "I shall undertake your case, Father Tripes. Quick, Tweany, the calendar! My astute brain deduces, from the fact that we have the funnies in color in our paper today, that it is Sunday, but I wish to take proper care to confirm my deduction. If I am right, we may yet be in time to take action this very night.

"Tell me, Father Stripe, does this other building have a garden?"

Our guest registered astonishment. "Yes, it does, but however did you know?"

"As I thought." Sheckls nodded sagely. "There is a deep plot underfoot. If you will leave us now, I hope to have the matter weeded out and have some word for you by tomorrow morning."

Such was our visitor's excitement and gratitude that he rose at once, wringing my friend's hand, and completely forgot to ask me to look at his throat. I noticed that he had also omitted to tell us about the attack on him.

"Poor woman"—Sheckls shook his head sadly when our visitor had gone—"besides everything else, those garments were rather large for her. She surely needs a shrink.

"But now to business," he added, rubbing his hands with Joy, that popular liquid soap. " 'BOING' sounds to me like a secret society, and I would be sure that my old enemy was behind it, except that the colonel is Nomor. But I must get ready at once!"

Without another word he scrambled down the stairs, then bounded back and into his room. When at last he emerged, cleverly disguised as a woman in a dress belonging to Mrs. Sexes, who is quite buxom, I thought he needed a shrink himself.

That was the last I saw of him for several hours. When he finally

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returned, he was bedraggled and haggard, with deep lines of worry etched on his noble brow.

"It is every bit as bad as I feared, Tweany," he said at last, throwing himself into a chair and muttering under his breath. "Nothing less than a two-pronged plot to overthrow our beloved England. I have foiled them for now, but have I stopped them for good?" He reached into an apron pocket and flung a handful of small wooden discs on the table.

"What does it all mean?" I asked wonderingly.

"You may well ask," he answered. "To begin with, I had little difficulty gaining access to the place, clad as you see me in this admirable disguise. The ruffians demanded money at once, which I paid so that I could remain unobtrusively to discover their plot. No doubt the money serves to further their devilish activities. They gave me a card filled with numbers, and at the top was printed their secret password: BOING!

"You will understand that I knew at once I was on to something big, when I thanked them profusely for the card, and was answered with a muttered, 'No big deal.' You see the significance of that, of course?"

I had to confess I did not. I am ashamed to admit it, but I cannot always keep up with my friend's razor-sharp mental processes.

" 'No big' anagrams to 'Boing' itself. What further proof did I need that something devious was afoot?

"But before I could fully fathom what was purported by 'Boing!,' or, alternatively, 'no big,' a pretty lady began handing wooden pieces like these you see before you to a big, burly man they called Grumbly Bain, who then called out combinations of numbers and letters. I jotted them down till my hand grew weary. Looking for a code, I wasted much precious time equating the numbers with the corresponding letters of the alphabet, which was particularly difficult as the numbers went as high as the thirties, and for the life of me I could not think what letter came after Z, which, as you know, is the twenty-sixth.

"Every now and then some excited person would leap up and shout their password, 'Boing!' This was followed by a pause and excited chatter, more money would change hands, and the number-calling would go on.

"Suddenly I realized how dense I had been. In my efforts to acquire encyclopaedic knowledge, I daresay there is scarcely any subject on which I have not read up, certainly with American sports among

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them. I now remembered that in the American game called football, much depends on combinations of numbers known only to the players of one team, which they call out before each play. I had understood that at the end of each series, the caller said, 'Hike,' though that was obviously only a password, for no hiking gear is in evidence on such occasions, and no one ever went for a walk. Apparently, they have changed the password to deceive the opposing teams, and it is now 'Boing!' "

I gazed at my friend with unfeigned admiration. "Only you, Sheckls," I cried, "could have thought of that. But what are these dastards planning to do? And what about these wooden discs you brought in?"

He lifted a thin hand. "One thing at a time, Tweany. You remember, I said the thrust was a double one. At the moment I was fully occupied with fathoming the meaning of their calling out football combinations. It came to me that in teaching the number combinations of their plays to scores of our citizens—for a price, remember—they are laying the groundwork for undermining that grand British institution of rugby. They will bring in football to crowd rugby out of our lives; with so many knowing the combination plays, they will prefer football, where they can place their bets to better advantage."

"But how can we stop this dreadful scheme?"

"Tweany, I believe I have already done so," he said solemnly, nodding to the little round bits of wood. "The combinations are read off from these discs. I managed to create a diversion by throwing a stink bomb into a far corner of the room, and under cover of the confusion stole a handful of these things. Now they no longer have the complete figures they need, and they are powerless."

"Sheckls, how brilliant!" I exclaimed worshipfully. "Then you have solved the case after all."

"Ah, if that were the only thing," he sighed. "But it leaves unanswered the question of why they use these little discs at all, which must be difficult to keep in order, rather than writing their numbers on paper like anyone else.

"But I have been studying them closely, and I think I see their purpose. Not only do the villains plan to undermine our sports, but our economy as well!"

"No!" I cried. "How did you discover this?"

"What is an industry for which America is especially well known? The garment industry, is it not? I believe, Tweany," he said impres-

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sively, "that what we see here are buttons with which they intend to sabotage our industry so that theirs may take over. Look closely. *These buttons have no holes!* Distributed to our garment manufacturers in great quantities, do you see what it would mean? Our clothing industry would collapse, and we should be forced to buy from Americans! Having replaced one of our industries and one of our sports with their own, they would be in a position to make us one of their colonies! (Or states, as they are called nowadays.) I presume they printed their numbers on these buttons in a move to combine the equipment for the two schemes and so reduce luggage space, as well as to confuse the trail. But it would take more than that to confuse Mooch Sheckls!"

"I am sure you are right!" I said in great excitement. "But what will you do now?"

"I must confess to being stumped for the moment as to how to stop this dastardly ploy. Can we enlist that old fool Redlites from Scotland Yard? Or my brother Firstcroc?

"I think," he said grimly, "that if I could crack the Boing! code, we might see daylight. I shall stay up all night for that purpose." He spoke coldly, a sure sign that the fire in the grate had gone out.

I left him pouring over the enigmatic letters. A tired but jubilant face greeted me next morning when I joined him to partake of our daily kerpips.

"It was quite simple after all," he explained happily. "I was stupid not to see it at once. The numerical value of the letters in 'Boing!' adds up to forty-seven, with B counting for 2, O for 15, and so on. Now, what does the number forty-seven suggest to you?"

I must have looked blank, for he added without further ado, "I can see you are puzzled. But what is the country behind all this nefarious business? Ah, light dawns, does it not?"

"But surely, Sheckls," I said doubtfully, "they have forty-*eight* states."

"Exactly!" he beamed. "Really, Tweany, you are getting on. They also have the District of Columbia, which in a sense makes forty-nine. Now if we arrange the states and D.C. alphabetically—and I have my atlas here; I know how to use reference works most cogently, as you know—the forty-seventh state is *West Virginia!*"

"I'm afraid I still don't see—" I murmured, hanging my head.

"I understand, Tweany," he said kindly. "It does take a brain of the first magnitude. But with a little adroit rearrangement of letters, we have *Virginia West!* I have no doubt that we shall find she was the

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young lady who handed the numbers to the man who called them out, and the ringleader of this entire plot! We have but to locate her and inform her that Mooch Sheckls is onto her game, and of course she will desist!"

My eyes were positively shining with Admiration (a new ointment I have been trying recently) as I composed the required message.

"And now for a telegram to Father Ripest, Tweany, to reassure that poor confused transvestite that his flock will return to him on Sunday nights.

"Is there anything of interest in the newspaper, requiring my unique assistance?"

"Only this, Sheckls," I replied, scanning the article I had been reading. "Some maniac last night disrupted a fund-raising game that has been held regularly on Sunday nights to raise money for a new school. It was sponsored by a civic-minded group called the Brotherhood Of the Illiterate New Generation. It seems this crazy person—'of indeterminate sex,' " I quoted, "not only drove them out of the building, but also stole some of their equipment, so that the game cannot be resumed."

"How terrible!" cried my friend, showing that keen compassion for which he is so much beloved. "Nothing is more important than education, as I think I myself can show to good example. I must offer my services at once to apprehend the villain and recover the purloined equipment.

"Another telegram, Tweany, if you please!"

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I trust readers recognized what Mooch Sheckls, in his peculiar relation to the obvious, did not: that the initials of the "Brotherhood Of the Illiterate New Generation" spell "Boing!" Of course readers recognized, in this anagram pastiche, that "Boing!" as well as "no big" anagrams to Bingo!

To my knowledge, pastiches on pastiches are rare, if they exist at all, yet Schlock Homes has tempted me for years, so, finally, here is his anagram counterpart, Mooch Sheckls. Tweany, of course, represents Watney, his faithful partner at 221B Bagel Street, here anagrammed to Beagl Street. (I also considered Blage Street.) Their housekeeper, Mrs. Essex, has become Mrs. Sexes. Lestride is one of the more frequently used names for the Scotland Yard detective, here offered as Redlites. Homes's brother Criscroft is anagrammed as Firstcroc. This story contains some proper names that are not anagrams, which seemed

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necessary to provide the proper-name puns I felt this story called for. However, I did succeed in a pun-and-anagram in one with Colonel Nomor, an anagram of Colonel Moron.

Other anagrams: Kippers, which appear on Schlock's breakfast table with undeviating regularity, are here given the anagram of kerpips.

The priest, as I hope the readers noticed, provided a variety of anagrams, being variously called Father Sprite, Esprit, Tripes, Stripe, and Ripest.

Sigmund Freud was referred to as Dr. Fugue Minds.

Big burly man—Grumbly Bain.

Finally, in regard to the author of the extremely clever and witty Schlock Homes stories, Robert L. Fish: since he himself writes also under the name of Pike, I felt something fishy was definitely called for; ergo—Rif H. Lobster.

EDITOR'S NOTE: These charming pastiches by Norma Schier are this year's tribute to the Baker Street Irregulars and their annual celebration of the birthday of Sherlock Holmes. The first piece needs no further explanation; the second, the Schlock Homes, is based on Robert L. Fish's clever parodies of the Holmes stories, first published here in *EQMM* in 1960. Robert L. Fish was, of course, known for a much wider body of work, authoring more than thirty novels and dozens of stories, and winning two Edgar Allan Poe Awards from the Mystery Writers of America. Like the members of the Baker Street Irregulars, the most illustrious of American Sherlockian organizations, Norma Schier has a great love for the Sherlock Holmes adventures. Her own stories testify to the immortal nature of the great detective, as, in a different way, does the gathering of the Baker Street Irregulars in January. For on that day they mark the 139th birthday of Holmes, who they claim is alive in Sussex, occupying his retirement raising bees.

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*For a breezy entertainment, take a look at this piece the author described for us as "kind of a folksy do in the open air" . . .*

# TEE FOR TWO

## by WILLIAM BEECHCROFT

On the eleventh tee, Merv Atherton sucked in his gut and addressed the ball. When he was younger, he'd had a stance as good as the Golden Bear's. The Second Nicklaus, they'd begun to call him on tour. That was before his putting went to hell, and he couldn't make the cuts anymore.

"Merv!" Ed Mittleman said behind him. "That twosome is only a hundred yards or so ahead of us."

Atherton straightened in irritation. "Dammit, Ed, they've dragged their butts on every hole. Now they're not even on the fairway, bumbling around in the brush under those palms looking for a ball they'll never find anyway. They won't even know we've played through."

He set his feet again, well back from the ball in his awkward, belly-offsetting stance, and eyed the green 310 yards distant. He brought the driver back through his trademark-slow backswing, paused, then whipped the club downward.

A good enough drive, not quite on the sweet spot. Mittleman could tell by the sound. The ball arrowed straight out for fifty yards. Then it began to hook left.

"Tsk, tsk," Mittleman burlesqued. "Only bad drive of the day, and it's gonna cost you."

The ball arched high, soared farther to the left, then streaked down into the wide hedgerow of booted cabbage palms and underbrush that separated the eleventh hole from the parallel eighth.

"Jeez, Merv, that's just about where—"

They heard a distant shout, then one of the duffers in there burst out of the bushes waving his arms and yelling something.

"My God!" Atherton's voice sounded as if he were strangling. "You don't suppose my ball . . ."

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* * *

All this I got later from Ed Mittleman. About the same moment Merv Atherton's ball clunked into the hedgerow bordering the eleventh fairway, I clinked my iced-coffee glass to Ike Lebber's iced tea.

"Damn, it's good to see you again after all these years, Ike," I said. "Too easy to lose touch."

"Ain't that the truth?" He gave me a long look. "How's business for Elrod Montgomery, private eye." Ike rolled that around as if he didn't really believe it. Usually I told people I was in the shoe business, not the gumshoe business. Saved a lot of dumb comments, but Ike had already heard somewhere what I really did for a living.

"I gotta admit I never pictured you as a private dick," he went on, "but it must agree with you. You're looking good."

"I'm looking hefty, my friend. And balding. The P. I. business? No car chases. No fireworks. Just observation and imagination." I filled him in on how rich I wasn't getting. "The time came for a vacation tour of the country and a chance to look up some of my old high-school buddies. You were on the list, manager of the Tap Room here, so—"

The wail of a siren racing up the drive put the rest of that on hold. I swung around to the window behind me. An orange and white county ambulance bumped over the driveway curb and barreled straight down the tenth fairway.

Then a guy stuck his brick-red face through the Tap Room's quaint swinging doors. "It's Russ Patterson, the lawyer. Hit by a wild drive on the eleventh!"

"He okay?" someone asked, inanely, I thought, in view of the ambulance's diminishing howl.

"Hell, no. He's out like a light!"

Reflex shoved back my chair. I found myself on my feet, then I wondered what I was doing. Not my case. Not a case at all. An accident.

But Ike grabbed my arm. "The golf carts are just outside!" Which is how I came to be chasing an ambulance down the tenth fairway like a starving shyster, with Ike Lebber hunched over the wheel.

We hummed past the tenth green and skirted the eleventh tee, flushing a trio of squawking crows. I spotted the ambulance two hundred yards down the fairway, close to the palms. When we got there, the two paramedics had unpacked their emergency gear and were being urged into the brush by a distraught guy in pink slacks and a white polo shirt. I was out of the cart before it stopped. With

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Ike wheezing behind me, I followed them into the hedgerow.

A stretch of Florida brush isn't like the northern kind. It's dense right down to the ground with prickly stuff among the ferns. I was glad the pink and white golfer and the paramedics were breaking the trail.

The victim of the errant drive lay about twenty feet in, face down in a stand of ferns. I could see a perfectly round, golf-ball-sized dent in his left temple, about a half-inch deep, some blood but not a lot. That wasn't a good sign. A yard this side of him lay the golf ball.

"You with him?" I asked the guy in pink and white.

"Yeah." He was preoccupied with the paramedics, who were checking vital signs. Then he scowled at me. "You a member? Haven't seen you around before."

"Visitor. Name's Rod Montgomery. Friend of Ike's here." I stuck out my hand.

"Harry Kimmel." His grip was icy limp.

"Hell of a thing," I said.

"Yeah." Kimmel stared at his golfing partner on the ground. "Ball zipped in here, smacked Russ on the head, and down he went."

I heard one of the paramedics mutter, "We're losing him." They rolled Russ Patterson onto his back. His face was pasty white, and his bulging eyes weren't blinking. One of the medics began mouth-to-mouth. The other locked his hands together and began to pump Patterson's chest. The rest of us stood around in the ferns, all eyes riveted on the three men on the ground.

Then the tension got to Harry Kimmel. Had to be some kind of shock to have a ball zip out of the blue and flatten your partner right in front of you. Head down, he began to pace. He held an iron, and he swished the club back and forth through the ferns.

Back on the fairway behind us, I heard a car pull up. I looked through the palms to see a big-boned, sunburned guy in khakis pick his way into the hedgerow toward us. When he reached our little fern patch, I saw that he carried a dark green campaign hat in his hand and wore a badge over his left shirt pocket—and a nameplate over his right. B. BARRETT BRUNDAGE, SHERIFF.

"Awright, what've we got here? Somebody called in an accident—" He spotted the prone golfer. "Oh, yeah. Say, ain't that that lawyer, Russ Patterson?"

"Yep," somebody said. Harry Kimmel glanced up from his nervous fern swishing.

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"Fella trying to stop the condo development over in the east end of town? Guess this'll put a crimp in his lawsuit."

"Sure will," one of the medics said, straightening up. "He's gone."

Now I became aware of how many people were in the ragged circle around Russ Patterson. Apparently so did Sheriff Brundage.

"Okay, I gotta make out a report, so everybody tell me who you are." He whipped a little notebook from a hip pocket, fished a pencil stub out of his shirt, licked its point, and nodded at me. "You first."

"Elrod Montgomery," Ike said for me. "He's a visitor with me. A gumshoe."

"A who?"

"A private detective," Ike said.

"I'm in charge here," Brundage stated to no one in particular, and he made a note. "Who're you?"

"Ike Lebber, manager of the club's Tap Room. Heard the ambulance, came down with Montgomery to—"

"I'm in charge," Brundage repeated. He turned to the pink and white golfer.

"Harry Kimmel," the guy said, glancing up from his fern inspection. "I was with Russ, there, looking for the ball I'd two-shotted in here. He was helping me look, then Merv's ball zipped in, smacked him on the head, and down he went."

Brundage licked his pencil again and nodded at the big-bellied golfer across from us. "You?"

"Merv Atherton. I'm afraid I drove the ball that hit him. Bad hook." He stared down at Russ Patterson, who stared straight up through the overhanging palm fronds. "I can't tell you how rotten I feel about this."

At that point, I noticed how little mourning was going on here for a dead attorney.

"Atherton," Brundage repeated. "As in Atherton and Kimmel, Real Estate? Wait a minute. Ain't you and Kimmel here partners?"

"That's right."

"Working on the east-end condo deal?"

"That's right, too."

"Well, ain't this one hell of a coincidence? Your partner's out here on the fairground—"

"Fairway."

"Whatever. He's out here with the lawyer fella who's trying to put the blocks to your business deal, and you clonk that particular guy dead with a wild drive. Some coincidence."

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Atherton shifted his bulk. "Not at all. The golf course is neutral territory, so to speak. We thought Harry could talk some sense into Russ during a friendly round. Ed Mittleman—"

"You Mittleman?" the sheriff asked the tall, jug-eared guy next to Atherton.

He nodded, and the sheriff made a note.

"Ed and I," Atherton went on with an impatient scowl, "we just happened to be behind them. They were slow as turtles, so on the eleventh, we decided to play through."

" 'Just happened,' huh?" Sheriff Brundage turned to Mittleman. Atherton's string-bean partner had a greenish tinge on his cheeks. He wasn't having a nice day.

"You in this real-estate lashup, too?" Brundage asked him.

Mittleman licked his lips. "N-no. Merv was looking for a partner, and I was handy. I was flattered, too. Merv's the best golfer at the club. Used to be a pro." He looked down at Patterson's body. "Do we have to . . . stand around here?"

Brundage shoved his notebook back in his hip pocket and hitched up his slacks. "Good point. All of you, wait over by the ambulance. Nobody leave till I tell you. That means you, too, Private Eye."

As we trailed out of the scrub, Ike murmured to me, "Don't mind the sheriff. He's running for reelection this year." I looked back to see Brundage pull a glassine envelope out of his shirt pocket, crouch and nudge the ball into it with his pencil. The paramedics had lifted Russ Patterson's body onto their stretcher and were covering it with a yellow plastic tarp. The others had trailed out to the golf carts on the fairway, with Harry Kimmel lagging behind to pick up his golf bag.

"Where you from, Montgomery?" Brundage had his broad-brimmed hat on now, and he looked properly official.

"Pennsylvania. Just outside Philadelphia."

"What kind of work you do?"

"Scut, mostly. Divorces, missing people the cops have run out of leads on. It's a living."

"Uh huh."

I sat next to him on the passenger side of the front seat of his green and white Dodge with the big gold stars on its front doors. Ike hunched on the backseat, no doubt thinking of the lousy publicity all this was going to bring the club. In the mirror on my side, I watched the ambulance's blinking lights disappear down the distant drive.

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Brundage had sent the others back to the clubhouse, and I wondered why he'd kept us here.

"You believe in coincidence, Montgomery?"

"Now and then, but not often."

"Yeah, me too. Fact, it's kind of a coincidence you're here."

I shrugged. "That's one you can believe in. Ike and I went to high school together. I'm on a vacation trip, he works at the club, so I dropped in to say hello."

Brundage swung around to Ike. "That right?"

"God's truth, Sheriff."

"Tell me something 'bout Atherton."

Ike said, "Golfwise or businesswise?"

"Whatever."

"Used to be a pro on tour. Then his putt went to pot. Couldn't sink them for sour apples. But his long game has always held up. He can still call a drive like Babe Ruth used to call his homers. It's got to be a real jolt to him to have hooked that drive so bad on the eleventh."

We sat silent in the sheriff's Dodge, hot even with all the windows open. A pair of crows glided past, heading for the hedgerow with hoarse caws.

"Crows down here sound different," I said.

The sheriff squinted out his window, watching the crows land in one of the cabbage palms. "They are different. Fish crows. Yours up north are carrion crows." He turned back to me.

"Look, I'm in charge here, but what do you think, P. I.? We got a guy at the tee your buddy says can call his shots like the Babe. And we got his partner two hundred yards out in the bushes with the guy who's filed a lawsuit that's maybe going to cost them both a bundle. Catchy scenario, but damned if I can believe Atherton—or anybody—can be good enough off the tee to snipe some guy he can't even see six hundred feet away."

My sentiments exactly.

"Suppose you're Atherton," Brundage said to me, "and you want to knock off Russ Patterson and make it look like an accident. How'd you go about it?"

I knew this technique, but surely the sheriff couldn't think I was somehow going to hang *myself*.

"I was in the clubhouse," I reminded him, "and Ike here—"

Brundage waved an impatient hand. "Come on, Montgomery, you don't see my cuffs out."

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"Okay. First place, I'd do just what Atherton did. Partner my buddy with him, then have the buddy—Harry Kimmel in this case—drag around the course until he saw a likely looking spot and flub into it. Kimmel said he two-shotted in there, not hard even for a duffer. Then he'd ask Patterson to help him look for the ball."

"But how in hell could Atherton hit him on purpose from that tee way back there?"

"The hook Merv could work out easy," Ike offered behind us. "But hit a target he couldn't see . . ." Ike shrugged.

"So he gets the ball about where he wants it," I said, "but a million to one it's going to smack Russ Patterson in the head. You know what I think? I think we should assume the ball *didn't* hit him."

Brundage held out his glassine envelope. "Take a look at it. It's Atherton's, all right. Got an MRA monogram on it. Mervin Roger Atherton. To my eyes, it fit that dent in Patterson's skull exactly. You tell me what else is going to make a dent like that? And look here, you can see specks of blood."

"Okay," I agreed. "Then let's assume it *did* hit him. But not out of the blue."

From the backseat, Ike said, "What're you getting at, Rod?"

Brundage looked interested. "So the ball slams in here, but doesn't hit Patterson. You saying Kimmel picked it up and whacked him with it hard enough to kill him? It'd take some doing to batter a guy to death with a golf ball."

"How about something like a . . . a slingshot?"

"A kid's toy?"

"I tried one of those 'kid's toys' at a flea market a couple of years ago. The kind powered with heavy-duty rubber tubing. I sank a ball bearing half an inch deep in a pine board. And the thing was small enough to hide in a golf bag—which Kimmel had with him in the ferns. Why would he lug his whole bag in there to look for a lost ball?"

"A point, a point," Brundage allowed, "and he never did find his ball anyway. Just kept swishing through the weeds with his club."

"Now why," I wondered, "with his partner dying in front of him, was Kimmel so intent on finding a damned golf b—"

Then I got it. "Oh," I said. "Very neat."

Brundage thumbed back his campaign hat, leaving a red mark low on his forehead. "You're doing all the talking, Montgomery. What's so 'neat'?"

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"A theory, Sheriff. When the timing and location are right, Kimmel flubs a couple of shots to get Patterson in there. That's not hard for a halfway competent golfer. Then he waits for Atherton's ball to zip in. He's got another MRA monogrammed ball in his pocket so the sequence is right. He hears Atherton's drive sock in, and he whaps Patterson with the extra MRA ball."

"With a slingshot?"

"Give you odds. Then the idea is to quickly find the ball Atherton drove so there won't be two MRA monograms lying around when the crowd gathers. Obviously he's got to leave the killer ball where it is. He's got a couple of minutes till Atherton and his partner get down here on their cart. But he can't find the ball Atherton drove. When we all crowd in here, he's panicked that one of us will stumble on it, and he can't stop himself from looking. That's what all that fern swishing was."

"But," Ike put in behind us, "if he'd found it, we would have seen him pick it up."

"Uh uh," Brundage rumbled. "All he'd have to say is, 'Oh, I just found my ball,' and stick it in his pocket. We'd have figured he was in shock and didn't realize what goofed-up behavior that was."

Had I sold Brundage? "If I'm right," I pressed, "it means that Atherton's ball is still in there."

"And that would clinch it? I might go along with that."

"How about the three of us spread out and walk the length of the hedgerow?" I suggested. "One pass ought to cover it."

One pass did. We found three golf balls, all of them obviously long residents of that particular stretch of brush. But that was all we found. All we accomplished was to roust the crows out of their favorite spurred cabbage palm.

Brundage whipped off his hat and wiped his forehead with a blue bandanna. "Kind of shoots your theory, don't it?"

Behind him, the crows glided back into the nearby tree. They sure loved that—

Observation. Imagination.

"Ike, you're not a very heavy guy," I said. "Let me give you a boost up there."

Brundage scowled. "Now what? I gotta get back to the office."

The crows weren't happy about Ike standing on my shoulders in there. It was a long shot, and I began to feel like a middle-aged grandstander with nothing to show for—

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"Hey, lookee here!" Ike cried above me. He reached among the foot-long "boots" left by the broken-off fronds of years past, and he held up a golf ball.

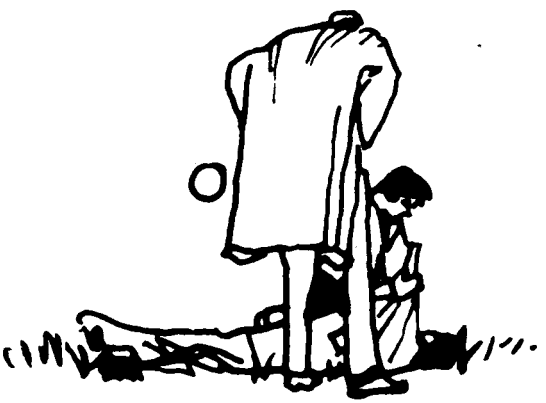
"Monogrammed 'MRA'!" he called down to us. "Looks like you're right on the money, Rod."

"Well, I'll be damned," Brundage relented. "No wonder Kimmel couldn't find the ball Atherton drove in here." He swung around and rushed back to his car radio.

By the time I helped Ike down and we pushed back out of the scrub, Brundage was all smiles.

"Just raised one of my deputies out on the main road. He stopped Harry Kimmel as he was driving out of the club. Searched his bag. Arrested Kimmel, all points out on Atherton. Gotta give you credit."

"No, you don't," I told him. "I'm just passing through. You take the credit. Get yourself reelected. This country needs reasonable lawmen." I gave him a grin. "In charge."



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# THE JURY BOX
## by JON L. BREEN

The use of pseudonyms is not quite as prevalent in mystery fiction as it once was. With so many talented writers working in the field, it's enough of a challenge to maintain one publishing slot without standing guard over several. The most multi-pseudonymous author in history, John Creasey, is twenty years dead, and the only contemporary writer who approaches him in number of bylines, Lauran Bosworth Paine, lately has concentrated on westerns under his own name. The multi-bylined Dennis Lynds now sticks primarily to his best-known name, Michael Collins, and several other writers who used to use one or more pseudonyms have apparently abandoned them: Bill Pronzini has not been Jack Foxx for quite a while, nor has Ross Thomas used his secondary identity of Oliver Bleeck. Donald E. Westlake no longer writes as Richard Stark or Tucker Coe—though he did pen a recent series as Samuel Holt. Since becoming a regular on the bestseller list, Dean R. Koontz has retired such alter egos as Brian Coffey, K. R. Dwyer, and Leigh Nichols.

At one time, prolific authors would commonly take a pseudonym to distinguish between different sorts of works or works for different publishers, and this still happens (e.g. Barbara Michaels/Elizabeth Peters, Parnell Hall/J. P. Hailey, or Emma Lathen/R. B. Dominic), but prolific authors of series and non-series works in various moods and styles, sometimes for more than one publisher, more often choose to stick to a single byline (e.g. Robert Campbell, Max Allan Collins, John Lutz, or Sharyn McCrumb). Even when a pseudonym is used, the author's identity is sometimes an open secret: in days past, no one was expected to think John Dickson Carr and Carter Dickson were two different people or that the Q. Patrick and Patrick Quentin novels weren't the work of the same writing team, and more recently the fact that Barbara Vine is really Ruth Rendell was made clear almost from the beginning.

Below are considered a thriller signed with a new pseudonym that challenges readers to guess whodunit, as well as new novels by a pair of writers who uphold the two-byline tradition.

*** John Abbott: *Scimitar,* Crown, $20. Though the note at the end of the book and a jacket photo credited to "Phyllis Rowland Abbott" give the author a phony persona in the tradition of Stephen King's once-secret Richard Bachman byline—and indeed at least one periodical has reviewed the book as a first novel—the jacket flap frankly admits Abbott (not the *EQMM* contributor) is "the pseudonym of a world-famous author." My policy is



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not to unmask a pseudonym unless I know the information has appeared in print somewhere else, so I won't say who Abbott is, but there are certainly clues for attentive readers. Those who pay close attention to copyright pages will learn much from the notice there, and readers who miss that may still recognize a very distinctive narrative style. As the blurb points out, the novel belongs to the fictional-assassination-attempt-on-real-political-figure category pioneered by *The Day of the Jackal.* Young doctor and sleeper assassin Sonny Hemkar gets his orders to kill a very major figure in New York City. This is not a first-rate example of the type, but the author's practiced skill at pace, structure, and dialogue will keep you reading.

*** M. K. Shuman: *The Last Man to Die,* St. Martin's, $17.95. Shuman, author of the series about New Orleans private eye Micah Dunn, also writes as M. S. Karl about reporter Pete Brady. This time, Dunn investigates the case of some forty-years-dead bones discovered at an archaeological site on Ship Island, a find that not unexpectedly has violent reverberations in the present. There is much familiar stuff here, including stock cops and gangsters, and Vietnam vet Dunn's anxiety nightmares may give him the private-eye record—in a very contentious field—for dreams recounted. But the use of history and background is fine, and I can forgive any number of clichés from a writer so dedicated to the well-wrought puzzle. Lovers of the pure whodunit will finish this book smiling appreciatively.

*** Jane Haddam: *A Stillness in Bethlehem,* Bantam, $19. The Haddam *nom-de-plume* is in the open-secret category: the copyright is in the name of Orania Papazoglou. This author has gone against the prevailing tide in a number of ways: while authors like Linda Barnes and Barbara D'Amato have started with male series sleuths before joining the trend to strong female leads, Haddam, who previously wrote of a female detective (romance writer Patience McKenna) under her real name, introduced the Armenian-American Hercule Poirot, Gregor Demarkian, an old-school Great Detective, in her series of holiday mysteries. In this seventh title, a holiday is revisited for the first time as Demarkian tries to find out who killed the civil-liberties crank who wanted to halt Bethlehem, Vermont's traditional (and very lucrative) Christmas pageant. Though the puzzle plot is typically well done, this is not quite up to the standard of the earliest volumes in the series, the major problem being excessive length, attained by more character detail than necessary and a sitcomish sub-plot involving Demarkian's Watson team of Bennis Hannaford and Father Tibor Kasparian.

*** John Mortimer: *Rumpole on Trial,* Viking, $21. Speaking of situation comedy, the distinguished series about Rumpole of the Bailey only occasionally delivers a jarring reminder that it belongs at least partly to that TV genre. Sitcom per-



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sonnel often have to act totally out of character to further the plot, and the first tale in this new collection gives a horrible example: Rumpole would *never* turn vegetarian or give up his Pommeroy's Plonk for even one meal out of infatuation with an attractive female client. If you can get past that sour note, this is a solid septet of Rumpole tales, somewhat stronger than its predecessor, *Rumpole à la Carte* (1990).

*** Marcia Muller: *Pennies on a Dead Woman's Eyes,* Mysterious, $18.95. San Francisco private eye Sharon McCone investigates a 1956 murder involving left-wing politics and a right-wing think tank. The story builds toward a mock retrial of the case before a Historical Tribunal, permitting a new variation on the old gathering-of-the-suspects finale. This may not be one of McCone's very best cases, but it displays the author's subtle humor, use of atmosphere, and knack for bringing to life characters both major and minor—an old radical married couple, though appearing only briefly, are especially vivid creations.

*** Robert Barnard: *A Fatal Attachment,* Scribners, $20. Novelist Lydia Perceval stole the affections of her nephews from their parents and exercised a dubious influence on their lives. Now, years later, a new pair of adolescent brothers comes under her thrall and murder results. Barnard, wearing his more serious face, is in good form here. You won't easily guess where the story is going, and the title's multiple meanings don't all reveal themselves until the end. The finishing surprise, though, has a slight out-of-left-field feel, and one would expect a student of Agatha Christie to provide more substantial clues.

Walt Brown's *The People v. Lee Harvey Oswald* (Carroll & Graf, $25) is not amenable to the regular rating system. Though certainly a work of speculative fiction—with made-up lawyers trying the case of the accused presidential assassin, who has survived the shooting by Jack Ruby after several months in a coma—it is best judged not as a novel but as a fresh way of restating the evidence against the single-assassin theory. There is no new solution offered, save for a clever but very limited theory on a single detail, and the tedious thoroughness of the trial description would surely lose most readers of a purely fictitious courtroom novel.

Any true-crime buff planning a Big Apple visit should grab a copy of *New York Notorious: A Borough-by-Borough Tour of the City's Most Infamous Crime Scenes* (Crown, $12), written with chatty irreverence by reporters Paul Schwartzman and Rob Polner. Cases both recent and classic are touched upon, but fans of S. S. Van Dine's Philo Vance novels will be disappointed at some lapses in jazz-age coverage: where are the sites of the 1920 murder of bridge expert Joseph Browne Elwell (which inspired *The Benson Murder Case*) and the 1923 slaying of showgirl Dot King (fictionalized in *The "Canary" Murder Case*)?

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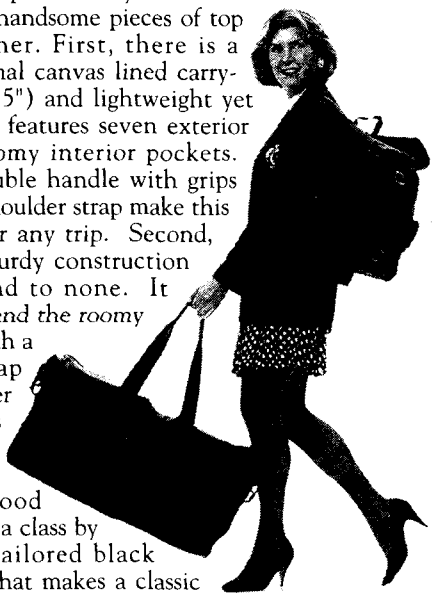

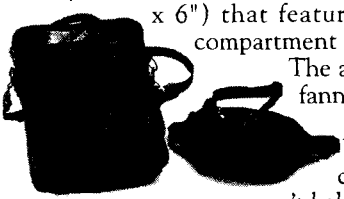

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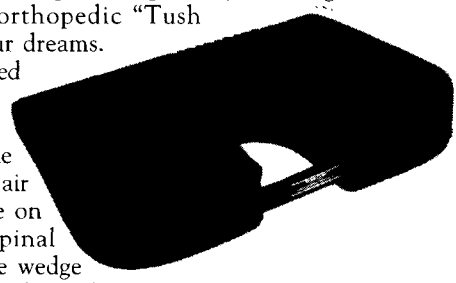

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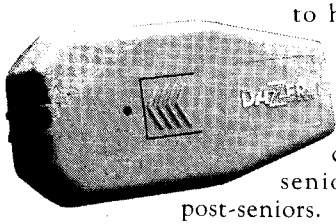


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a *NEW* short story by

**DONALD OLSON**

*There can hardly be a more popular subject for mystery writers than the spouse murder, but the twists and turns on this theme seem to be inexhaustible. Bet you won't have thought of this one . . .*

# A MATTER OF WIFE AND DEATH

***by DONALD OLSON***

"I suppose you wish I'd broken my neck instead of my ankle."

Standing over his wife's body, Patrick Lanyard recalled Bettilu's typically waspish remark upon his arrival at the clinic where she'd been taken following her skiing accident—and the rejoinder he'd been wise enough not to utter: *Breaking your neck, my dear, would be a snap.*

As in fact it had been. A snap. Quick, soundless, and painless, sedatives and pain pills having plunged Bettilu into a sound sleep almost as soon as she'd subsided, awkwardly because of the foot-to-knee cast on her right leg, onto the comfortable motel bed. She hadn't bothered undressing and lay now as if asleep, head twisted upon the pillow, features all but hidden under bandages around her head and across one cheek.

Patrick checked the time. Almost five-thirty in the morning. Outwardly calm, his manner betrayed no more than a mild impatience as he moved to look out into the grey-misted motel parking lot. He'd requested a ground-floor room at the end of the rear wing, where now only one other car, a blue Mercedes, stood in front of the adjoining unit. In the frozen predawn stillness even the birds were as silent as the sleeping and the dead. Again Patrick glanced at his

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watch. Sonya was already ten minutes late. He dared wait no longer; he would have to manage without her.

Softly opening the door, he stepped out, made sure no one was astir, opened the trunk of the Lincoln town car, removed a small bag, and returned to the room, leaving the trunk open. In moments he'd bundled Bettilu's dead body into his arms, eased it through the door and into the trunk, somewhat clumsily because of the cast.

At that instant two things happened at once to shatter Patrick's steely composure. Glancing down as he was about to shut the trunk, he saw, lying on the terrace, the shoe he'd evidently jammed too loosely onto Bettilu's foot before lifting her body from the bed. In the act of snatching it up he heard a click as the door of the neighboring unit opened. A man stood in the doorway, the amber overhead light shining on tousled silver-white hair.

As if the shoe in his hand were a smoking gun, Patrick flung it into the trunk and slammed the lid shut. Forcing a smile, he turned to face the man. "Sorry," he said. "Hope I didn't wake you."

The man didn't move except to raise a hand to the collar of his robe. "No, no. I wasn't asleep. Heard a noise and thought I'd better check the car."

Before Patrick could reply, the man withdrew into the room and shut the door.

Damn! Patrick brushed a sleeve across his sweating forehead, shakily lit a cigarette. Relax, he told himself. No cause for alarm. In that murky light and from the stranger's angle of vision, it was most unlikely he could have seen what lay in the trunk of the Lincoln. What he *would* have seen had he stepped outside a moment earlier was too ghastly a thought to contemplate. Patrick went back inside and took a quick belt of the whiskey with which he'd fortified himself before killing Bettilu.

Like a blond, handsome, somewhat overweight Dorian Gray, he looked in the mirror with a faint, superstitious dread that murder might have left some visible stain of evil on his countenance.

Patrick opened the door before Sonya had a chance to knock, drew her quickly into the room, crushing her in his arms, his mouth seeking hers. "God," he whispered, "I was getting worried."

"I had the taxi let me off on the highway like you said." She looked past his shoulder. "Darling? Is she . . . ? Did you—"

"Yes. It's done."

"Oh God."

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"It's *done,* Sonya. Let's not talk about it. We haven't time."

As if they'd rehearsed each move several times, they proceeded in silence to do what had to be done. Patrick opened the bag and removed rolls of gauze and adhesive while Sonya took off one shoe and stocking. Deftly, Patrick contrived a passable imitation of a cast, then applied strips of gauze to Sonya's head and cheek. Bettilu's hair was light brown, Sonya's almost black, but no matter, the scarf would hide it and Bettilu's oversize dark glasses would shield the eyes.

"Put the coat on and try the crutches," said Patrick, picking up the full-length sable from the chair where Bettilu had flung it. Sonya slipped it on, tied the scarf around her head, fumbled with the crutches.

Patrick nodded approvingly. "It'll do."

"Did she make a fuss about stopping when you were only thirty miles from home?"

"When didn't she make a fuss about everything? But she could hardly object when I put on the act about my back giving me hell." It wasn't the first time he'd made use of that old war wound. "I called her friend Babs and told her we were here for the night. I said Bettilu was asleep."

Sonya hugged the coat around her as if despite the room's heat she couldn't stop shivering. "I wish it were over. I mean *all* over. Everything."

He put his arms around her. "Believe me, honey, there's nothing to worry about." He'd debated mentioning the close call with the man next door but thought it best not to alarm her. "Now I must get started. Try to relax. I'll be back in less than an hour."

She followed him to the door. "Take care, darling. If you were stopped—"

He pressed a finger to her lips, then quietly slipped out, got into the car, and drove away.

To murder his wife and get away with it, to end his money woes with one bold stroke, and to be free to marry Sonya had for months remained no more than a wistfully impractical ambition, as pleasing and unrealistic as winning the lottery. Financially, the situation was precarious if not critical. Sonya, having once been Patrick's secretary, knew this as well as he. Bettilu, no less aware, hadn't bothered to hide her indifference; nothing that happened to the business could endanger *her* lifestyle. Daddy's money would always pro-

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vide a satin cushion of security. Patrick often thought nothing would please Bettilu more than to have the business fail, thus leaving him dependent upon her own resources, dependent and therefore all the more subservient to her whims.

That Bettilu had bluntly refused to invest any of her own capital in the faltering business had infuriated Patrick, as did her whining, priggish attitude toward "Daddy's money."

"*Daddy* is dead," he'd remind her. "It's your money now, not Daddy's."

Bettilu's shrimplike nose had pinkened with sanctimonious outrage. "I have a moral obligation to respect Daddy's wishes. He warned me on his deathbed. 'Don't do anything foolish, Betts,' he'd say. 'Hold tight to those purse strings.' "

"Saving the business from ruin? That's foolish?"

"If that's the situation, my dear, it's only proof Daddy was right about your lack of business savvy."

"I didn't invent the recession."

"Nor shall I be a victim of it," she'd snapped. "End of discussion."

Certain things happened shortly after that to create one of those chains of circumstance an eager and desperate man could only regard as the blessed intervention of fate, rather like a luckless gambler suddenly finding himself with a winning poker hand. Bettilu, during a skiing trip with her friend Babs at a resort called Limberlost, about two hundred miles north of Gresham, had fallen and broken her ankle, badly, as well as suffering facial bruises and a mild concussion. Babs had called Patrick from the clinic just as he arrived home from the office, where he'd made arrangements to fly to Albany the following Monday for a meeting with bankers.

"Patrick? Sorry to call with bad news but poor Bettilu's had an accident." (Oh, what wildly extravagant hopes had risen in Patrick's heart! Quickly dashed.) "Not to worry. She's okay. Much better than she looks, but they want to keep her through the weekend. You can fetch her home on Sunday, so there's no use your coming up till then."

That same evening, relaxing in front of the TV with a whiskey and soda, Patrick had chosen to watch an old movie on the classic films channel. It was one of his favorites: Fred MacMurray and Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity*.

Baffled, but eager to share Patrick's excitement, Sonya had regarded him solemnly as he'd sketched the movie's plot. "You say it

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was an insurance scam, right? They had to make it look like the woman's husband fell off a train. Trains don't run through Gresham anymore."

Sonya hadn't been the brightest of secretaries, but after years of Bettilu's bulldozing intellect Patrick found her naivete sweetly endearing.

"That's not the point, love. The husband had a broken leg, see? In a cast. That's what gave me the idea. And we're even luckier. Babs told me half Bettilu's face is covered by bandages."

"Honey, we don't even look alike."

"Doesn't matter. You're both small, and let's be generous to dear old Betts, your figures aren't all that different. Young Conley's never seen you *or* Bettilu. He's only worked at the office for three months. A glorified gopher, hot to make points with the boss. The perfect witness that Bettilu was still alive when we left her at the house."

Sonya snuggled closer. "Run it by me again. I'm sure you're missing something. It can't be that easy."

"It *is*. The whole object of the exercise, sweetheart, is to give me a rock-solid alibi—not that I'm likely to need one. It'll look like a bona fide accident. I pick Bettilu up at the clinic late Sunday afternoon. Thirty miles from Gresham, near Limestone, I complain my back's acting up. That old war wound. By then we're both tired and hungry. I insist we stay overnight at the Gateway Motel, get a good rest, and finish the trip next morning. Late that night, in the motel, Bettilu will have another 'accident.' A fatal one. I drive back here with her body, make it look like she fell down the stairs. Meanwhile . . ."

Patrick's scenario unfolded with the faultless precision of a well-crafted movie. The only thing he hadn't allowed for was the fog reducing visibility between Limestone and Gresham, forcing him to drive more slowly than he'd planned. To his mind, the only sticky—possibly sticky—part of the plan involved the lapse of time between Bettilu's death and her body's eventual discovery. That Bettilu had died around five-thirty in the morning while his corroborating witness Leo Conley's testimony would place the time of death somewhere after eight, would create a discrepancy evident to anyone with cause to regard the death as suspicious. But why should anyone? Patrick felt confident Bettilu's death would be accepted as accidental. If the time factor presented a slight risk, he was willing to take it.

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The short trip to Gresham was uneventful, and Patrick began to relax as he reached the outskirts of town and turned into Parkmeadow Road at that hour of the morning when none of the neighbors—the nearest being a quarter mile away—was likely to be abroad. Timing himself, he was pleased to find that no more than ten minutes had elapsed before he was back in the car, having arranged Bettilu's body in a position consistent with a fatal fall from the top of the stairs.

The fog having lifted, he made better time on the drive back to the motel. The blue Mercedes was still parked in front of the adjoining unit but this time a tall, striking redhead with a white leather coat draped over her shoulders stood beside it smoking a cigarette. As Patrick got out of his car the motel door opened and the man who had earlier given him such a scare stepped out.

Too bad they're leaving, thought Patrick. Perhaps he might have devised a means for them to catch a glimpse of Sonya. It wouldn't have hurt to have other witnesses that "Mrs. Lanyard" had been alive at the time.

"Getting an early start?" said Patrick brightly.

A smiling nod was his only answer as the man opened the car door for the girl, got in behind the wheel, started the engine, and drove away.

Patrick found Sonya in a state of breathless agitation, certain that some disastrous mishap must have occurred during Patrick's absence.

"I kept trying to think what I'd do if you didn't come back," she moaned.

After ten years under Bettilu's iron thumb, Patrick loved having a sweet little thing like Sonya relying on him for her happiness and peace of mind. "Worst part is over, honey. Now for my call to Conley."

He caught the young man at breakfast, explained the reason for his call. Conley professed his eagerness to be of service and promised to leave at once for Limestone.

"My back's really killing me," Patrick told him. "I thought a night's rest would help, but it didn't. You can leave your VW here, Leo. After we get my wife home and you drive me to the airport, you can bring someone back here with you to pick up your car, then leave the Lincoln at the airport for me when I get back. By then my back ought to feel better. I'd cancel that meeting, but it's too damned important."

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Patrick winked at Sonya as he hung up. "Thank God for eager beavers who want to make brownie points with the boss."

The light that had greeted Patrick's arrival faded from Sonya's misty blue eyes. "I'll be alone in the house with . . . her."

"Only for as long as it takes you to get out of that 'cast.' Just be sure you're not seen leaving the house."

"You will call, won't you, hon, soon as you're back from Albany?"

"Soon as I can. After that we'll have to stay apart for a while. We've been very careful so far. Bettilu never suspected a thing. Six months from now we'll get married. Bettilu's estate will be settled by then. We'll go away. Take a long trip, maybe abroad. No more worries. No more love in the shadows."

Young Conley, bright-eyed and breathless, arrived a half-hour later. Acknowledging his introduction to "Mrs. Lanyard" with a shy smile, he murmured a few words of sympathy about her accident. Sonya, with a scarf around her head and wearing Bettilu's sable coat and dark glasses, muttered something about having caught a cold to add to her misery and kept a handkerchief close to her lips.

"No time for chitchat, you two," said Patrick, moving with the painful stiffness of a man with back trouble. "I've got to be at the airport by eight-thirty."

Conley stowed their bags in the trunk of the Lincoln and helped Sonya into the rear seat as Patrick, still wincing, settled himself in front. Sonya pretended to nap during the half-hour trip to Gresham. When they arrived at the house in Parkmeadow Road, Conley parked in front of the entrance and helped Sonya into the foyer as Patrick held open the door.

Patrick feigned a reluctance to leave. "You're sure you'll be all right until Babs gets here, darling? Say the word and I'll cancel my flight."

"Don't be silly, Patrick. I'm sure I feel better than you do, poor lamb. I'll be fine."

Patrick repressed a morbid impulse to step into the living room, as if he needed reassurance that Bettilu's body still lay at the foot of the stairs, invisible from the foyer.

They kissed goodbye. Patrick felt a sense of mounting euphoria as they drove toward the airport. No military operation could have been planned and carried out with neater precision. He could picture the detestable Babs's shock upon entering the house and finding her

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friend dead, could hear the squeak of distress in her voice as she phoned the awful news to Patrick in Albany.

The object of the Albany meeting had been to keep the hounds at bay if possible, to buy himself time, and now, with the vision of Bettilu's money adding conviction to his appeal, Patrick projected a fresh air of confidence as he faced the phalanx of bankers, emerging from the meeting if not victorious, at least with a reprieve, and a reprieve was all he needed.

He lunched at the Exchequer Club and then—it was shortly after noon—he phoned Babs, feigning concern at having failed to reach Bettilu at home. Would Babs be a dear, drive over and check on her? Patrick was unprepared for the coolness in Babs's tone.

"You mean to tell me, Patrick, that you simply dumped poor Betts at the house and breezed off to Albany?"

"She insisted I not cancel the trip. She knew how important it was."

"You might have called me. I could have been there when you got home."

"Babs, I wanted to, but you know Bettilu, how damned independent she is. I'm sure she's okay, probably fell asleep as soon as we left. She didn't rest well last night. But just to ease my mind, I do wish you'd pop in on her. My flight leaves at two. I'll be here at the Exchequer Club until a quarter past one."

Annoyed at the tiresome Babs's tone, Patrick headed for the lounge, parked himself at the bar, and ordered a double Manhattan. In the ensuing half-hour he didn't once glance at the time, but all the while mentally counted off the minutes. He was on his second drink when he heard himself paged. He took the call at the bar.

"Patrick! Thank God I caught you before you left."

"What is it, Babs? Did you—"

"Patrick, something terrible has happened."

Only when he was once more alone in the house following the ordeal of Bettilu's funeral did Patrick feel safe in congratulating himself upon having accomplished the perfect murder. If his darling Sonya could have been with him to share his quiet celebration, his happiness would have been complete, but he would do nothing reckless; discretion was no less important now than when Bettilu was alive.

Instead, he spent the evening in his study preparing for next morning's conference with Bettilu's lawyer, and after enjoying a nightcap, went to bed early.

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It was the lawyer, Aaron Silversmith, arriving at the house in Parkmeadow Road the following morning and failing to get any response when he rang the doorbell, who discovered Patrick's body behind the wheel of the Lincoln, its engine running, garage doors shut.

The same coroner who had ruled Bettilu's death an accident found no cause to suspect anything other than suicide in Patrick's.

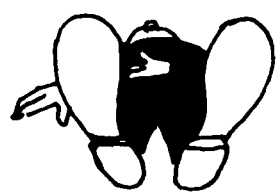
At approximately the same time he was signing the death certificate, a phone conversation was taking place between a man in Gresham and another in an office several hundred miles away.

"No problems, then?"

"Nah. You can tell your man he has nothing to worry about."

"Perhaps there *was* nothing to worry about. The senator was sure this Lanyard fellow didn't recognize him, but he had the foresight to write down his license number. We've come too far, now the nomination's a cinch, to take any chances. Meeting his bimbo in a motel, no matter how remote it was, I told him it was a mistake. Blackmailing little bitch, she wasn't about to let him off the hook. When her body's found, her picture's sure to be spread across the papers and TV. About Lanyard, there'll be no question it *was* suicide?"

"No chance. He had the perfect motive. I went to his wife's funeral when I was tailing him, trying to decide how to do the job. You should have seen the poor sap. He was really broken up. Anybody could see he was sick with grief."



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*With this collaboration, two veteran authors return to our pages. Stanley Cohen first published with* EQMM *in the 1960s and has since placed many stories in national magazines and anthologies. Josh Pachter, who first appeared with us in 1968, has continued to write short stories while also pursuing a career as editor and critic. The following is a tale about a beautiful Swede they say is "mean as a snake" . . .*

# ANNIKA ANDERSSON

## by STANLEY COHEN and JOSH PACHTER

Dennis Fowler was certain he'd never seen the woman before. He was walking along Madison Avenue, in no particular hurry, when he noticed her, and as he approached, he decided that he definitely wished he knew her. He was struck by the perfection of her lush, white-blond hair, which flowed straight to her shoulders, and he wondered how she could keep her sheer dress looking so crisp and fresh in the broiling July heat. In his mind's eye he caught quick mental glimpses of the two of them in some darkened watering hole, drinking something cool from tall, frosty glasses.

As he got nearer, he noticed that she was studying him with cool intensity, her arms folded almost angrily across her chest. She was definitely a sharp-looking lady; in fact, a superstar. But in a cold sort of way. And why was she staring at him like that? He was sure he didn't know her. And he hated that she was breaking the spell. The mental picture of them leaning toward one another over a tiny cocktail table had been a pleasant one.

He smiled uncertainly at her and kept on walking, feeling a little uneasy under the unrelenting pressure of her dispassionate stare, and as he passed her, she spoke five words, clearly, and unmistakably to him. "I'm going to kill you," she said.

He stopped, turned, and looked at her. "You're what?"

"I'm going to kill you," she repeated. She said it calmly, with only the whiteness of her knuckles betraying any emotion. Her eyes were

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a clear light blue, the color of sky on a cloudless summer day.

He shook his head. What kind of weirdo was this one? He turned away, took a step, and changed his mind. "Why," he asked, turning back to her, "would you even say something like that to me?"

"Why?"

"Yeah, why? I mean, here I come, walking down the street, minding my own business, and out of nowhere, you say an off-the-wall thing like that. What is this? I don't know you from Adam."

"Well, I certainly know who you are. You're Dennis Fowler. And I'm going to kill you."

"How do you know my name?" Fowler asked. "And assuming for the moment that you're even thinking such a thought, why on earth would you feel that way?"

"I'm Annika Andersson. Does that answer both questions?"

His knees sagged and he felt lightheaded. Annika Andersson. Louise had spoken of her often. Suddenly, a trace of familial similarity was there. The blue eyes, the small nose, the clear, light skin and blond hair. . . . "Look, Annika, what went down between Louise and me was strictly our business. It happens all the time. Every day. Both ways. And I don't know what's going on in your mind, but in today's world, it's no basis for threatening to kill someone."

"Well, please be advised, in this case I'm making it my business, and I do consider it a basis for killing somebody. And this isn't just a threat. I'm going to kill you."

Fowler glanced around him at all the people passing them on the crowded midtown sidewalk, and he wondered if any of them could guess the nature of the conversation he was having with this beautiful Scandinavian woman. "Tell me," he said, with all the bravado he could muster, "are you planning to do this yourself?"

"I hardly think so," she answered. "As you know, money is not a problem."

"How long have I got?" he asked glibly.

"I've already started making some arrangements, but unless things work out more quickly than I expect, you needn't be concerned for a day or two, anyway."

"I'm beginning to think you're serious."

"You can count on it."

"Annika, it's just not being done, today. Listen, would you like me to apologize to Louise, or something like that? Because I'll be more than glad to, if that's what's on your mind."

"It's a little late for that now, Dennis."

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Fowler shook his head. "I can't believe I'm having this conversation in broad daylight," he said, as if talking to no one. He looked at her. "I can't quite figure out what you're up to, but I think I'm going to go to the police and tell them—"

"Tell them what?" she interrupted.

"All about our little conversation."

"I'll deny it. Who do you think they'll believe? And if necessary, I'll have our attorneys initiate a harassment suit against you. Then, who do you think they'll believe?"

Fowler studied her for a moment and began to feel a little weak. She *was* serious. And she had the resources to do most anything in the world that she wanted to do. "Look, Annika," he said, "if there's something you'd like me to do, tell me what it is, and I'll do it. I'm sorry about all that happened with Louise. I apologize to you for that, and I'll apologize to her. And I'm ready to admit that maybe I didn't handle things as nicely as I might have. But, really, you've got to give up even thinking about an idea as crazy as that."

"Dennis, I'm afraid you're a little late with your apologies. Louise is in terrible shape. She went back to Stockholm, and I don't know if she's capable of ever getting over it. She's become practically catatonic. As for you, I've made up my mind, and I just thought I'd put you on notice."

"Annika, please listen to—"

"We'll be in touch, so to speak," she said. Then, after turning to walk away, she stopped and turned back. "Oh, one thing," she said coolly. "I suggest you avoid elevators. Just a suggestion, of course." She moved away from him into the crowd.

He stood motionless as he watched her disappear. Suddenly he was aware that he was trembling. She was right about the police. They would think he was crazy. A total wacko. People don't kill over busted relationships in today's world. Except that Annika Andersson was an exception. *She* was the wacko. And a rich one at that. What was he going to do?

First, he wanted to get back to his apartment, and he chose to do it quickly in a cab instead of the subway. After getting out of the cab, he entered his building and nodded to the doorman, who was a new one, having only been around a few days. He pressed the button for the elevator in exactly the same way he'd been doing it without thought for all the several years he'd been living there. Then he pulled his hand back and took a step away from the elevator door. The elevator! How was he going to get to the twelfth floor?

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The elevator! *And* the new doorman! He went back to the glass front door. The doorman was outside, standing on the canopied walkway, looking in, and their eyes met. What did that intense expression mean? The doorman had a brooding face with black, deep-set eyes and a swarthy complexion. A Middle Easterner, probably.

The doorman came to the door, pulled it open, and stuck his head through. "You need something?"

"Thanks, no. Everything's okay. Everything's fine."

Fowler turned and walked back to the elevator. Could she have set something up already? Anything was possible. But if he waited until someone he knew came along and was going up, well, surely she wouldn't have it done in front of a witness, or even worse, take an innocent bystander along with him. He dropped himself onto a chair in the lobby near the elevator door.

After a half-hour of waiting, the doorman came and asked once again if anything was wrong. No, he insisted, and he began to wonder if the doorman was maybe a little anxious to see him go up to his apartment. But perhaps he was just becoming unnecessarily paranoid. At any rate, he definitely wanted to get inside the sanctum of his own place, and so he decided he'd climb the eleven flights.

He took the first five, rested, and then went on, stopping briefly every couple of floors to get his breath. He reached his door, started to insert the key, and then stopped. What if someone was waiting inside for him? Unlikely. But still a possibility. And once again, he realized he was trembling. He wasn't about to go in there. At least not alone.

Hearing a door open, he froze. Was he about to feel bullets from a silenced handgun rip into his body? Should he dive to the floor and try to scramble around the corner before the assassin could take aim?

"Hello, Dennis."

At first, just hearing the voice shook him. Then he let out his breath and turned. It was his longtime neighbor, Harry.

"Dennis, are you okay? You look like you just saw a ghost."

"No, I'm okay."

"You're sure, now?"

"Yeah. I'll be all right."

"If you say so. Take care, now."

"Thanks, Harry. Uh, Harry, why don't you come in for a drink? Seems like I haven't seen you in a while."

"Another time, Dennis. Thanks anyway. Got to run."

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"Uh, well, come in for a moment. One minute. Somebody left something here for you."

"Somebody *left* something for me? Why didn't they leave it downstairs?"

"I guess they wanted to be sure, or something."

"Highly irregular," Harry said. "What was it?"

"Uh, an envelope. Yes. A large envelope."

"Can't imagine what it could be. Okay, why don't I come in and pick it up?"

"Sure you wouldn't like a drink?"

"Another time, Dennis. Thanks."

Fowler cautiously unlocked the two locks and pushed the door open, half expecting a fusillade of shots to greet them. He allowed Harry to walk in ahead of him. When nothing happened, he followed Harry into the apartment. "Now, let's see," he said. "Where did I put that envelope?" He walked toward the desk and began looking through the pile of clutter. "Check the kitchen table, Harry. I think I might have put it there."

He watched as Harry walked into the kitchen and returned. "Was it in the kitchen?" he asked as he continued to fumble through the pile of stuff on the desk.

"Are you sure someone left something for me?"

"Positive. A large brown envelope. I thought it was either here on the desk or in the kitchen. Check the top of the chest in the bedroom. I seem to recall putting it there." He watched as Harry went into the bedroom and finally returned.

"Any place else you'd like me to look?" Harry asked facetiously. "How about in the garbage?"

"I think I may have left it on top of the hamper in the bathroom."

"Dennis, is this some kind of joke?" Harry asked as he walked into the bathroom and returned.

"I remember, now," Dennis said, still at the desk. "I think I was tidying up and just tossed it into the front closet, and I was going to stick it under your door. If it's not here on the desk, it must be in there."

Harry walked to the closet and opened it. "Dennis . . ."

"I remember now, Harry. It wasn't for you. It was for that new guy down at the end of the hall, and I gave it to him. Sorry to hold you up."

"You sure everything's okay, Dennis?"

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"I'm just a little hassled today, Harry. Don't mind me." He walked Harry to the door.

After closing the door, he went into the kitchen, put some ice in a glass, and poured himself a large glass of scotch. He took several heavy swallows and sat down. How would she try to do it? With an assassin? . . . . He still hadn't checked the bedroom closet. . . . Or perhaps with some kind of booby trap? . . . . Maybe the scotch had been poisoned. . . . Or the ice cubes. . . . If so, it was too late. He drained the glass and poured some more. No liquor had ever tasted so good before. She'd told him to avoid elevators. He lived on the twelfth floor and his office was on the twenty-ninth.

He thought about Louise. Beautiful woman. Little doubt about that. The blond hair and the spectacular figure. But she'd gotten to be so pathetic. "Dennis, we have to talk about how things are between us," she was constantly saying. How long had the whole business gone on? Two and a half, nearly three years? Putting her down in front of other people, dropping her, taking her back. Like a yo-yo. Breaking dates. Not calling for weeks at a time. "Dennis, you know how I feel about you." "Dennis, we've got to talk." He'd gotten sick of the little talks. And finally the Club Med thing. "Look, Louise, this is the way it is." "But, Dennis, you came here with *me*. You *brought* me here." Her crying always got on his nerves.

The telephone. He answered it after two rings. Annika.

"Dennis, I just called to mention that I think you should avoid stairwells, too."

"Elevators, and now stairwells? Annika . . . Annika, listen to me. Tell me what you'd like me to do and I'll do it. Okay? Would you like me to call Louise in Stockholm? I'll do it. But please, Annika Enough's enough."

"Dennis, I called to make a suggestion. You can do whatever you like." She hung up.

He dialed Louise's number. The phone had been disconnected Phone. Of course. If he could get one of Annika's calls on tape, he'd have something to take to the police. He quickly finished his drink and hurried out of the apartment to go somewhere and buy a phone answering recorder. He took the elevator to the ground floor.

He stared at the fancy clock on his office wall, watching the second hand make its lazy revolutions. He'd managed to get to the office taking a crowded elevator, but after a sleepless night, he'd been able

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to do nothing since arriving there but brood. Was this whole thing real?

He was relieved when the phone rang. Phone calls were distractions that kept him from thinking about it. They took away the need to motivate himself. But this phone call proved to be less than a relief. It was Annika Andersson.

"Dennis, I called to tell you that you wasted your money buying that phone machine last night. I don't plan to call you at your place anymore."

"Annika, this is crazy. This whole thing's crazy. Tell me what you want of me and let's put an end to this business."

"Dennis, you needn't raise your voice, and you know what I want of you. Try to relax and spend the next couple of days in peace."

"Annika?"

But she hung up.

Dennis got up from his desk and hurried into the boss's office. "I want to transfer to Chicago," he said.

"You what? Dennis, what's the matter with you?"

"It's for personal reasons."

"Such as?"

"I said they were personal."

"Dennis, are you crazy? You're in the majors here. And doing great. Chicago's an outpost, at least for this agency. They don't handle any of the big national accounts in Chicago. Strictly local stuff. Penny ante. Why on earth would you want to go out there? You'll die out there."

*I could die a lot quicker here.* "I want to go to Chicago and I want to go soon. In fact, today. Now! So do something for me. Arrange it. It's important to me. Okay?"

"Dennis, you're off the wall. Even if I went along with it, I couldn't arrange something like that in one day. Would you mind telling me what this is all about?"

"I'm leaving for the airport now. Call them out there. Tell them I'm on the way."

"Dennis!"

But Fowler didn't wait around to discuss it further. He went back to his office, threw a few things that related to Chicago accounts into his briefcase, and left. The elevator had only a few people on it, and he rode it nervously to the street level. Then, assuming that he was being followed, he glanced around to see if he could spot the tail. He saw no one who looked the part.

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He walked onto the sidewalk and began an exercise he hoped would shake even an experienced tail. Knowing the neighborhood, he went in and out of buildings, maintaining a frantic pace, always staying in the middle of clusters of people, and going from street to street, until finally, he grabbed an opportunity to get into a cab right after he'd turned a corner. He ducked his head, feeling confident any tail would have lost him as the cab pulled into traffic. He told the driver to take him to LaGuardia Airport.

He took the first flight to Chicago and then a taxi downtown to one of the hotels on the south side of the Loop. After checking in, he went to his room, called New York, and asked for the boss.

"Where the hell are you?" the boss asked.

"I'm in Chicago. I told you I was coming here. Get things set up for me, will you please?"

"Would you mind telling me what this is all about?"

"It's personal. I told you that. Besides, if I did tell you, you wouldn't believe me."

"Try me."

"I'm here, I want to work here, and I'm asking you to make the necessary arrangements. You owe me that much. Okay?"

"You're crazy," the boss said finally, before hanging up.

With that much accomplished, Fowler felt a little better. Then he decided the first thing he needed was a drink and a few moments to collect his thoughts, to decide on what to do next. After entering the dark lounge and mounting a barstool, he saw immediately that the bartender was going to be his friend as he watched him pour with a heavy hand.

He sipped the scotch, which seemed to quickly penetrate his head seeking out the troubled spots and soothing them, easing the frenzy slowing down the squirrel cage. He'd need a few clothes to wear until he could figure out how to get more of his stuff sent from New York. Later on, he'd look for more permanent quarters; the hotel would do for a while.

Louise drifted into his mind. She always seemed so helpless, so vulnerable. She was a perfect target for any man who wanted to take advantage of beautiful women. He'd been attracted to her at first because of her spectacular looks, but after a while, it became like a game, or perhaps like toying with a small fish that was ineptly hooked. The Club Med thing *had* been a little much. He should never have taken her there. He'd already become totally

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bored with her at the time. Her sister, Annika, was a different kind of woman.

After finishing a couple of drinks, he felt better. He wandered out of the bar and onto the street, where he walked aimlessly for a while, not knowing the neighborhood. He happened onto a halfway decent men's clothing store and went in, buying some clothing that had to be left for alterations, and some shirts, ties, socks, and underwear, which he took with him. He returned to his hotel room and neatly arranged the new things in drawers. Feeling a little drowsy from fatigue and the scotch, he stretched out on the bed.

The ringing phone brought him out of a state of half-sleep, and as he lay there, listening to it ring, his pulse began to accelerate. Who could be calling? He hadn't even told his boss where he was staying. A wrong number, maybe. Or maybe the front desk with some trifle. No one else knew he was there. Still, he was afraid to reach for the phone, and he continued listening to it, flinching with each ring, wondering when it would stop.

When it became clear that the only way to get it to stop was to answer it, he picked it up. "Yes?"

"Dennis?"

It was her! He began to shake so violently he almost dropped the phone. "Who is this?" he asked, wondering why he did.

"It's Annika, Dennis. Annika Andersson. Surely you knew that. Dennis, why did you go to Chicago? It makes no sense. Why didn't you stay in New York where you could be among friends and familiar surroundings at a time like this? It's pointless to be running from one place to another. You're making things tougher on *yourself,* not on *me.* Go back home, Dennis, and wait there, where you'll be comfortable."

"Annika, what do you want from me?"

"We've already discussed that."

"Annika, I'll do anything you ask if you'll just stop all this and leave me alone."

"We've been all through that, Dennis. Let's not repeat ourselves. I suggest you return to New York right away."

"Annika, you're not going to do this to me. If I have to, I'll go out and do something to get myself thrown in jail."

"I hope you won't seriously consider subjecting yourself to that kind of indignity, Dennis. You don't really think that would be much of an obstacle to my carrying out my plans, do you? It might buy you a day or two. But not much more. Don't do it, Dennis. It won't

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be worth it. It'll just make the whole thing wretched for you. Dennis, come home."

"Annika?"

She hung up.

He had to escape. There had to be a way. He wondered how much money she could be spending on this business. The money was certainly there. The Andersson family maintained controlling interest in an international Scandinavian furniture business. And Annika helped run the empire. She could afford to do most anything she wished. Just how much was she squandering on all the unseen men who had to be skillfully following his every move? But no matter how skilled they were, there had to be a way to get away from them just once, and when this was accomplished, he'd be free.

He got up and left his room, returning to the street. If he ran and someone was tailing him, that someone would also have to run to stay with him. And if that someone was running, that someone would be highly visible. Then he would at least know his adversary. He broke into a fast run, practically a sprint, down the sidewalk, in and around other pedestrians, turning corners, staying in crowds, but running. The July weather was brutally hot and his clothes were becoming soaked. And he was out of breath, panting, near collapse. But he kept running, running, running, stopping for a moment from time to time to look back and see if he could spot someone else running.

He came to another hotel, one which had entrances on three streets, and he dashed inside. He spotted a mezzanine and ran up the steps to a point from which he could observe the entire lobby. His tail would have to follow him there to stay on him. He stood behind a marble column and watched for anyone who could possibly be the tail. Someone else who had been running. Someone else hot and out of breath. Nothing. He kept watching patiently as he waited for his breathing to return to normal. Nothing. No one had entered and looked around. No one hot or breathing hard. Maybe he had pulled it off by running all that distance. Maybe he had freed himself! Could he be free? Still, he'd take no chances. He continued standing there, watching for anyone who looked as if he'd been in a chase, anyone who appeared to be unobtrusively trying to spot someone. . . .

He almost slipped to the floor and abruptly woke up, realizing that he had dozed off while standing there. Glancing at his watch he found he'd been there for more than an hour. The sun had set

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outside, and it had been a very long day. What should he do next? There was no returning to his hotel.

Looking around him, he noted the entrance to a dining room on the opposite side of the mezzanine. Waiters were dressed in formal black; busboys wore plain white jackets. He walked around the mezzanine and stood looking at the posted menu. He also watched the traffic in and out of the dining room, and when one of the busboys came out of a door marked "Employees Only," he caught a glimpse of several of the white jackets hanging on hooks in the service corridor just beyond the door. At a moment when all waiters and busboys were occupied, he pushed the corridor door open, took one of the jackets, and hurried away.

Wearing the jacket, he went down the steps and returned to the street, where he concentrated on walking in a relaxed manner. The jacket would hopefully give him a changed appearance. After walking for several minutes, he came to another hotel. A bus was parked in front of it, an airport limousine, almost ready to depart. He walked a short distance away from it, peeled off the jacket, threw it into a refuse basket, and went back to the bus, boarding it. He slumped down in the seat for the ride to O'Hare Airport.

When he reached the airport, he went to Air Jamaica and inquired about flights to Kingston. No more flights for the night. He went to Eastern and found he could get to Miami, where he could connect with a flight to the island the next morning. He bought a ticket, using a credit card. He'd simply keep using credit cards until . . . until what? He didn't much care. He boarded the plane, bought two scotches, downed them quickly, and soon fell asleep. After all, he'd escaped.

After arriving in the Miami Airport, he went into a bar and drank quietly until it closed. Then he found himself a comfortable spot and flopped down to spend the night. Dennis Fowler sleeping on an airport floor? Why not? At least he was a free man.

The arrival at the airport in Kingston, Jamaica, proved to be problematical. He had no passport, not even a birth certificate or voter registration. "Here's my driver's license," he protested to the immigrations clerk in the starched white shirt. "What are you so upset about? I'm a tourist. I'm here to spend money in your country."

"What brings you here so unprepared, Mr. Fowler?"

*Would you believe I'm running for my life?* "Uh, just a spur-of-the-moment decision to take a few days off. Haven't you ever made a quick decision like that?"

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"Where will you be staying while in Jamaica?"

(Probably somewhere up in the Blue Mountains where she can't find me.) "Uh, I don't know just yet. Probably in one of the hotels downtown. At least for tonight."

"Don't you have reservations anywhere, Mr. Fowler?"

"It shouldn't be a problem. I'm sure I'll find something suitable."

After some delay, during which a supervisory type was brought out to interrogate him further, he was finally allowed to pass through to the baggage-claim area, and since he had no baggage, he breezed through the customs check into the oppressive tropical heat of a Jamaican summer day.

And standing in the shade of a covered walkway, looking coolly beautiful in a white dress, was Annika Andersson. She smiled at him as he walked through the door. "Dennis, why'd you come here? This is no place to be in July."

"Oh, no," he whimpered. His knees buckled and he slid to the pavement. . . .

When he awoke, he found himself in an airplane, a small jet, slumped in his seat. After figuring that much out, he straightened up and looked around. She was sitting two seats behind him, reading a magazine. A large, muscular-looking man sat across the aisle from her, also reading a magazine.

Dennis got up and went back to her. "Where're we going?"

"To New York. This is our company plane."

"Why bother going back? Why didn't you just finish the matter there? It would have been easy."

"Too easy, Dennis. No challenge. . . . Dennis, what's your hurry? I'm in no great rush. Why are you?"

"How'd you know I was here? I thought I'd shaken them in Chicago."

"They're professionals, Dennis. Don't you understand that?"

He glanced at the heavily muscled man across from her, who appeared to be paying little attention. "Annika?" He began to tremble. "Annika, either do it and get it over with or let me off the hook. Okay? Annika!" He was shouting. "Annika! Do it or let me go! Do it or leave me alone!"

"When we're ready, Dennis," she said quietly. "It'll be a few days." She pressed a button by her seat. "Until then, you'll just have to try and relax."

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He watched a man in a flight officer's hat walk toward them from the front of the plane, and almost before he saw the syringe in the pilot's hand, he felt the needle rip into his arm. "Annika!"

"Go back to your seat and take a nap, Dennis."

He felt the effects of the drug flooding through him almost instantly. He didn't bother to resist when the pilot led him back to his seat, and as soon as his body settled into it, he found himself being engulfed by an urgent need to sleep.

He woke up once again back in his apartment, with a splitting headache. Looking at his watch, he found he'd been sleeping for roughly twenty-four hours. He wanted a drink but was afraid that would make him feel worse. Perhaps some air, and something to eat. He hadn't eaten in nearly two days.

He got off the bed and walked into the living room, where he found all the clothes he'd bought in Chicago stacked neatly on the table. Next to them was his Chicago hotel bill, marked: "Paid—Cash." He had to get out of there. He went quickly to the door of the apartment.

After hesitating for a moment in front of the elevator, he decided he couldn't possibly care less. He rode down to the main floor and almost bumped into the new doorman as he rushed outside. Reaching the sidewalk, he broke into a run once again, as he'd done in Chicago, and ran block after block, sometimes on the sidewalk and sometimes in the street. When he was about to drop from exhaustion, he stumbled into a shabby coffee shop and flopped down in a booth.

A waitress came over and he said, "Coffee," between gasps for air. "And some aspirin," he added. "A lot of 'em. A whole bottle." *A whole bottle.* The words danced across his mind. *A whole bottle.* After sitting for a few minutes, trying to get his breath, he happened to glance toward the street through the large plate-glass window . . . and there she stood, looking cool and composed as she peered in at him! Annika Andersson! As soon as their eyes met, she turned and disappeared from view.

He jumped up and dashed out of the coffee shop, but when he reached the sidewalk, she was nowhere in sight. Had she really been standing there? He was positive that he'd seen her. He looked frantically in all directions. She was gone. In a car, probably. He started running in the direction of the one-way traffic. Maybe he'd catch up to her at a red light. He ran until he could run no farther,

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and then dropped to the edge of the sidewalk where he sat with his feet in the street, his back against a post, his sides heaving painfully, his head throbbing. When his sides quit hurting, he got up and walked slowly back to his apartment.

Going into the bathroom, he opened the medicine cabinet and took out a large bottle of aspirin. His hands were shaking. How many should he take? Two? Hardly enough for *that* headache. Four? Six? Eight? A good number. He took eight aspirin. As he put the bottle back on the shelf, another small bottle caught his eye. He took it and studied it. A prescription drug. "Take one as needed." With trembling hands, he opened it and took out two of the capsules. That should do it. A double dose. Maybe if he could stay asleep long enough, it would all just go away. Disappear. Evaporate. He swallowed the two capsules with a little more water and returned the tiny bottle to the shelf.

From there he went into the bedroom. He was weak from hunger, but all he could think about was curling up inside the velvet blackness of sleep. He dropped onto the bed, wrapped his arms around the pillow, and closed his eyes. The Andersson sisters paraded across the screen of his mind, first Annika, looking totally collected, totally in control of everything, and then Louise, totally vulnerable. He thought back to the first night he'd brought Louise into his apartment, and relived the evening, and the night, moment by moment. . . .

A hand on his shoulder shook him, trying to wake him up. He felt dizzy and sick to his stomach, and he tried to ignore the hand, but it persisted. How long had he been asleep? He rolled over and looked to see who could be there. He squinted his eyes and struggled to focus them. . . . Annika Andersson! She was sitting on the edge of the bed. He began shaking violently.

"Dennis, take it easy. It won't be much longer now. It'll all be over soon."

"How'd you get in here?"

"Surely you must know I have keys to this place. . . . Dennis, I came to tell you that we're going to get finished with this business in the next day or two. I wanted to put you on notice so you could relax and get yourself ready."

"Annika, please . . ."

"Don't grovel. It won't change anything."

"Annika?"

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"It'll be easy for you, Dennis. Try not to worry about it."

"Easy? What do you mean, easy? Easy how? And where? Here?"

"Depends on you. And what you do. Don't make things difficult for yourself. Keep it easy."

"Annika?" He reached out for her, but she moved back and avoided his pathetic attempt to touch her. "Annika, you've got to let me off the hook. I know you can have me killed if you want to, and I might even deserve it. And I'm sorry. But you've got to let me off the hook. I'll do anything you say. Annika . . . ?"

"Goodbye, Dennis. And since I won't be seeing you again, this really is goodbye." She got up and moved away from him as she spoke.

"Annika?"

He heard a door close quietly.

He lay on his back and stared at the patterns in the paint on the ceiling. Patterns full of images he'd never noticed before. Patterns that seemed to be moving and changing, dissolving and re-forming, like clouds. His head throbbed and he felt queasy. What he really wanted to do was crawl back into sleep, where he was safe. She was really going to do it. There was no escape, nothing he could do. But at least while he was asleep, he was safe.

As he struggled to his feet, the nausea and headache pain intensified, but that didn't matter, because in just a few more minutes he'd be asleep again, where he'd be safe. He went into the bathroom and took first a bunch more aspirin, he wasn't sure how many because he didn't count them, but a bunch, maybe another eight, maybe a dozen. Anything to stop the throbbing. Then he reached for the other bottle, the little bottle, and looked at it. Still plenty more in there. He opened it and shook out two more of the capsules, carefully, oh so carefully. His precious supply. After washing those down with a gulp of water, he returned to his bed, walking in a daze, almost hobbling, like an old man. He crawled back onto the bed and stretched out to wait for sleep.

Somewhere off in the distance, above him, or below him, or behind him, but way away from him, he heard a phone ring, one, two, three times, and then stop, after which he heard a voice, a familiar voice . . . his own! . . . followed by a high-pitched sound, a beep, and then another familiar voice, followed by silence, comforting silence. . . .

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The phone again. This time he was slightly more awake. He listened to the three rings, and then his own voice, followed by the beep, and then the other voice. Annika Andersson. . . . "Dennis, why didn't you return my call? I suggest you call me right away at this number . . ." He reached out and turned off the machine in the middle of the number. . . .

The headache was gone. The sickish feeling in the pit of his stomach persisted, but the headache was gone. He was lying on his side, staring at something across the room. Knobs. Knobs on drawers. Round, gleaming knobs, standing out from the grain of the wood, the crazy, wild, erratic patterns of the woodgrain. Only three feet away, but it looked like a mile. . . .

He tried to sit up and when the flood of nausea washed over him, he fell back onto the bed. She would be sending them soon. There was little time left. Nothing to do but wait. No use making things complicated. Just wait quietly. Let them come and take care of it. Then, nothing to worry about. Not even the lease. And no more bills to pay. And someone else would have to dispose of all his junk and get the apartment ready to be rented again. . . .

And she would be so pleased with her businesslike handling of the matter. . . .

No! He wouldn't let her get away with it. At least he'd rob her of the pleasure of having done it. Too bad, Annika Andersson, if you feel cheated, but you didn't know who you were dealing with. No one gets everything they want, now do they? That's right, lady. You waited too long. You missed your chance. . . .

He struggled to his feet. Just a little farther . . .

When he reached the bathroom, he opened the cabinet behind the mirror and took out the little bottle. He poured all of the capsules into his hand and stuffed them into his mouth. A swallow of water and down they went. Then, back to the bed. Sorry, Annika Andersson, but nobody wins them all. . . .

"Dennis, wake up. Why didn't you answer your phone earlier?"

He could hear the voice coming through a long, long tunnel. But he could see no one. He couldn't see or feel anything. He could sense only quiet, peaceful darkness, penetrated by the voice.

"Dennis, wake up. I've got some news for you."

The voice again, breaking through the stillness, but growing more faint.

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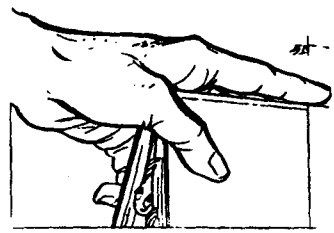
"Dennis, listen to me. I'm canceling the plans I had for you. Are you listening? I've changed my mind. You can forget all about it. Louise is better. She's met someone who cares about her, and she's come out of it. He's even asked her to marry him. So I'm letting you go. Did you hear me? Dennis, what's the matter with you? Dennis! Am I going to have to shake you to pieces to wake you up? Wake up, Dennis! Do you hear what . . ."

The voice faded completely and all was totally still.



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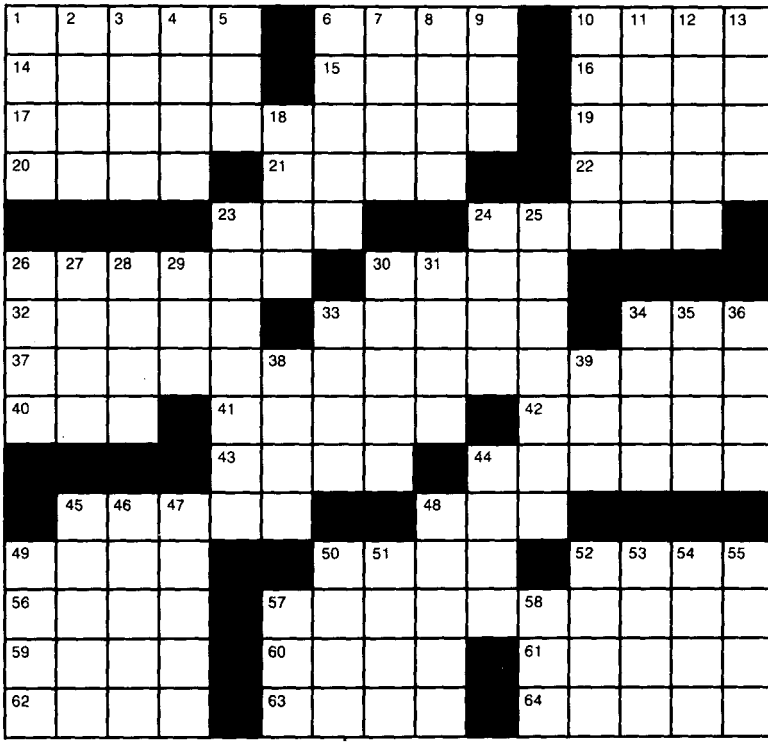
# THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

## by Ruth Minary



*Solution on page 128*

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49 _____ a one, none
50 Precedes deep or high
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54 Redact
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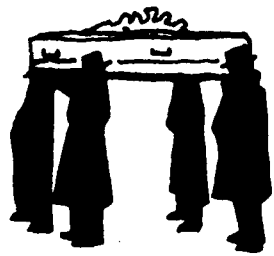
58 Sleuth Spade



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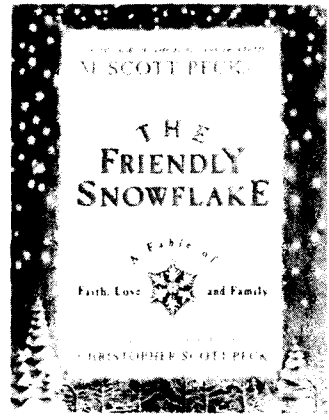


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*Author of six previous stories for* EQMM, *Mary Amlaw makes her home in Kennebunkport, Maine, where she now devotes most of her time to writing. . . .*

# SILVER BIRD

## *by* MARY AMLAW

How could a brother of his be so unbelievably stupid? Eliot wondered. Did Dave really imagine he could threaten to expose Eliot to the stockholders as a thief, and live?

Dave prowled the study, a scowl darkening his ordinarily sunny countenance, and ticked off demands on his fingers quite as if he, and not Eliot, had charge of the situation.

"You'll resign as chairman of the board at once. Resign from the company, with no input to the directors and no backroom meddling over any decisions the board may take. In short, you'll sever all ties with Forrester Pharmaceuticals."

Although Eliot had been expecting Dave's demand, it struck him as unfair. "The company was hardly more than a mom-and-pop operation when I took over," he protested mildly. "I'm the one who turned it into an international Goliath."

"You've turned it into an international disgrace," Dave contradicted. "Hiking prices out of all conscience, drug dealing, thieving—God knows what sleazy contacts you do business with! You've dragged our name through the mud, and I'm not letting you get away with it. Either you do this my way or I'll see you in jail!"

"What's in it for me, doing it your way?" Eliot couldn't quite keep his tone free of contempt even though he wanted Dave to think he had the upper hand. Keep the unsuspecting fool of a crusader off guard until this business was finished—Eliot's way.

"It isn't so much what you'll get," Dave explained. "It's what you won't get. Publicity. The IRS on your back. Stockholders asking questions. Resign from the company, and you can go on with your life just as it is with no one the wiser."

"But you'll take control of the company," Eliot said.

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"Just until we're out of the messy deals you've made and can hold up our heads again."

Dave's greatest weakness, in Eliot's estimation, was his high-minded conviction that others were as anxious to do right as he was himself—a weakness Eliot had used repeatedly to his own advantage. "And once Forrester Pharmaceuticals is out of the woods, what then?"

Dave had never seemed particularly interested in business. He was interested in causes; protecting the environment had been his pet until Alison, his wife, contracted AIDS from a blood transfusion when their daughter Lauren was born. By the time it was discovered, Alison was doomed. Noble-minded Dave wanted to use the company resources and profits to find an AIDS cure. In the process of setting up this venture, he stumbled on Eliot's secret business. Had their roles been reversed, Eliot would have demanded a share of the illegal profits, not justice.

"I'll turn the company over to someone else to manage," Dave said.

"But not to me."

"I can't trust you, Eliot. There's something in you I don't understand—some need for power, for manipulation. Your divorce from the company has to be complete. Otherwise, I blow the whistle."

That was the answer Eliot had been expecting, and it sealed Dave's fate.

You naive fool! Eliot thought, nodding his head submissively even as he fingered the gun safely nestled under the jacket of his lightweight linen suit.

"Actually, Dave, I think you're doing me a favor. It will be a relief to have this thing settled. It's been preying on my mind." Eliot manufactured a sheepish grin for Dave's benefit. Like a lamb to the slaughter, Eliot thought. Unsuspecting, idealistic, wimpy Dave.

"I suppose you'll want my written confession as insurance that I won't go back on my word," Eliot suggested, knowing Dave would never think of such a thing on his own.

"I'm surprised you're taking it so well, Eliot." Dave suddenly seemed very boyish, as relieved as a ten-year-old when the bully he expects to slug him backs off and apologizes instead. "Frankly, I expected the fight of my life."

As well you should, Eliot thought. "There's paper in the desk drawer. I'll dictate, you write. I think better on my feet."

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Dave obediently rummaged for pen and paper. His big basset-hound eyes beseeched Eliot for understanding. "I wouldn't be so hard-nosed about this if it weren't for Lauren. She has to grow up with our name. I don't want her to be ashamed of it."

Eliot felt nothing but contempt for his younger fool of a brother. The idiot couldn't even let himself enjoy the triumph of victory; he had to apologize for coming out on top!

"Children change a man," Eliot agreed. He himself was childless, and intended to remain so. The life of a wealthy, influential bachelor suited him—all of the fun and none of the responsibility.

"Lauren is the joy of my life," Dave said. "Wait until you have kids of your own, Eliot. You'll be amazed how your priorities will change."

Eliot began to pace as if thinking, but he had already worked out every word he meant Dave to write.

"Start with today's date," Eliot suggested. "Then write—let's see—'My brother has proof that I've been embezzling from the company and misusing company funds for years. I can't face the consequences of being found out. My life wouldn't be worth living. I'm taking care of things the best way I know how.' "

"You don't have to be so melodramatic," Dave said. "Just say you realize you must sever all ties with the company and not interfere with my efforts to set things straight."

Eliot leaned over Dave's shoulder to read what his brother had written. "I think it's admirable just as it is." Without a single qualm of conscience to stay his hand, Eliot put the gun to Dave's temple and pulled the trigger. The silencer muffled the sound.

All that remained was to press the gun into Dave's hand. The world would understand that Dave's life had fallen apart. First the death of his much-loved wife from AIDS earlier in the year, and now the threat of exposure as a criminal.

"Dave hasn't been the same since he learned Alison was doomed," Eliot would tell the mourners. Eliot would inherit Dave's half of the company, and no one would think anything of it.

The perfect murder. The dead man fallen over the suicide note penned in his own hand; his killer the chief mourner.

Eliot's self-congratulation halted. A light breeze stirred at the French doors leading to the terrace. He felt eyes staring at him.

There on the terrace stood Dave's young daughter, Lauren, her eyes wide with terror, her body paralyzed by fear. She had seen Eliot murder her father.

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"I thought you and Nancy were at the beach," Eliot blurted thoughtlessly. The little girl was dressed for town in white ruffles and ribbons. Too bad her regular routine had been changed on this particular day. He would have to kill her, of course, and manage it in a way to avoid suspicion. Eliot moved toward her, a false smile on his face.

Seize her, hide her, arrange an accident for her. Seven-year-olds were always running in front of cars and falling out of trees.

"Lauren!" The voice of Nancy Taylor, Lauren's live-in caretaker. The child was so traumatized she seemed incapable of response. Her blue eyes stared up at Eliot as if unable to comprehend what they had seen.

"You keep your mouth shut," Eliot warned the little girl. "If you say a single word about this, I'll kill you."

Satisfied that Lauren would remain too terrified to betray him, Eliot backed away from the terrace and eased out of the study. There would be time to deal with her later.

Lauren was not the only witness. Nancy, expecting to find Lauren hiding behind the enormous urn of petunias outside the study door, had seen the little girl jump up unexpectedly and stare into the study. Curious to know what enticed Lauren to give up her game, Nancy gazed with her in time to see Eliot raise the gun to Dave's head and shoot.

As Nancy rose, horrified, she saw Eliot move toward the terrace. There was no time for her to rescue Lauren before Eliot reached her.

The best Nancy could do was distract him. Instinctively, she concealed herself behind a thick, ground-sweeping fir and called Lauren's name.

When Eliot retreated, Nancy darted forward. Lauren, still staring into the study where her father slumped, murdered, over the antique desk, didn't seem to know Nancy was there.

Nancy grabbed Lauren's hand. "Run! We have to get away from here as fast as we can."

Nancy was afraid the child was too traumatized to move, but when she took her hand, Lauren began to run with her, the ends of her hair ribbon and the skirt of her white dress fluttering behind her like the useless wings of a bird too young to fly.

"Into my car," Nancy directed. "Lie down on the floor in back." She covered Lauren with the beach blanket, her head already in

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overdrive, assessing possible courses of action. She couldn't simply run to the nearest police station for help; Eliot owned police and politicians by the score. There was only one person she trusted: Detective Sergeant Mike McGuire. But would she have time to reach him before Eliot realized she too had seen the murder, and sent someone to stop them?

"Stay down, Lauren," she cautioned the silent child as she gunned the motor. "I'm going to drive like the wind!"

Eliot would know the truth as soon as he noticed her Toyota was gone, for she never left the grounds with Lauren without telling Harris, Eliot's security man, where she was going and how long she'd be away. She kept glancing in the rearview mirror as she crossed Brookline, half her attention on the traffic and the other figuring how to get to Mike McGuire before Eliot caught up with her.

At the outskirts of Boston she glimpsed Eliot's silver Mercedes several car-lengths behind her, Harris at the wheel. He would have no trouble forcing her to the side of the road. Even if he hadn't been armed, he was three times her size and strong as a bull elephant. Frantically she searched for some way to elude him.

On a hill to her left, the spire of the Daughters of Elias Convent rose above the surrounding rooftops. Abruptly Nancy veered in its direction. Although she hadn't been in the area since high school, when she used to accompany her mother on visits to cousin Sister Clare Francis, she remembered the enclosed parking area, shielded from the street by a pair of high wooden doors. She knew how to enter the convent through the kitchen where no one was likely to see her. If Harris caught up with her before she reached Mike McGuire, Lauren would be safer here than anywhere else on earth.

"We're going to stop at a safe place," Nancy told the silent child. "Keep under the blanket while I check things out."

Nancy's little Toyota darted up the hill, took the curve at the top as neatly as a slalom medal-winner, and whisked speedily into the parking lot. "Wait for me," she warned Lauren as she leaped from the car to close the blessed doors before Harris, trapped at the foot of the hill by a traffic light, got close enough to see where she had disappeared to.

Zebulon Williams, perched in his favorite hideout, a maple whose leafy branches grew over the wall of the Daughters of Elias Convent, had a fine view down to Washington Street on one side and St.

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Anthony's Church on the other. Self-appointed protector of the kindly but unworldly nuns, he spent part of every school vacation day checking out the convent grounds.

At the Washington Street side, the teenagers were playing their favorite game: stop the traffic. The little brown Toyota didn't interest them and they let it pass. The big grey Mercedes was something else. As soon as it paused for the light, they swarmed arm in arm into the street, surrounding it with their linked bodies. Usually a trapped driver, intimidated by the shouting boys and the sleazy look of the neighborhood, backed away at the first opportunity. Some, drunk or stoned into insanity, gunned the motor and hurled curses. The teenagers, nervier than the drivers, held contests to see who pulled back last.

Although he was only nine, Zebulon thought it was a stupid game.

The driver of the Mercedes did something unusual. He opened the window and threw a handful of greenbacks to the gleeful boys and roared up the street.

Zebulon thought it might be chasing the Toyota, now safely hidden in the walled-off lot reserved for the cars of visiting dignitaries. Zebulon knew every car that normally parked there, from the chauffeured limo of the cardinal to the battered Chevy of Detective Sergeant Mike McGuire.

He'd never seen the brown Toyota before, or the dark-haired woman in the sleeveless cotton dress who kept looking about furtively as she headed for the garden at the back of the building.

Zeb dropped lightly from tree to wall to keep her in sight. Something about her seemed wrong. Even the retreatants who came to the Daughters of Elias for spiritual direction never showed up sleeveless, no matter how hot the weather. And none of them invaded the sisters' garden.

As Zebulon watched, the stranger approached the rear of the convent and let herself in.

She had entered the kitchen, a place Zebulon was very familiar with. Sister Clare Francis, the cook, often invited him in for a sample of whatever good thing she was baking. Conscious of his role as protector, Zebulon walked back along the wall, dropped to the ground, and checked out the car.

It shone like a showroom model from a distance, but up close, a thin dusting of pollen marred the effect. The car had been parked under a tree, but where in the inner city was it possible to do that?

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Just because the woman who had parked the car looked pleasant and harmless didn't mean that she was. In this neighborhood, even nine-year-olds sold drugs on the street. The woman might be up to something dangerous for the sisters. Arson, perhaps, or theft. It could be useful to have a complete description of her car handy.

First he memorized the plate number, then peered in the windows. When he reached the right rear, two steady eyes peered back at him. They were blue, a rare color for this area, and the girl they belonged to was younger than he was. Rarer still was her hair, a thick mass so blond it was almost silver. "Silver bird," Zebulon murmured. He stared at her, mesmerized.

She was on the floor, huddled under a blanket in spite of the heat. When she realized Zeb had seen her, she pulled the blanket over her head and lay still, as if she could vanish under it, or turn into a bundle of laundry.

"I won't hurt you, pretty bird," Zeb whispered, forgetting she couldn't hear him through the window. He tried the door. It was locked.

He withdrew to his perch in the tree to think things over. Was the girl kidnapped? Abandoned? Maybe she had materialized by magic after the driver left the car. She might be an alien from an advanced supercivilization—or better yet, one of the angels Mother Mary Dominic insisted were real, even if they were invisible to most people.

The woman returned, unlocked the car, and helped the girl out. Hand in hand, they hurried to the back of the convent.

Zebulon kept pace with them along the top of the wall. Whoever the woman was, she couldn't be a criminal; she was too naive about protecting herself. Although she kept glancing furtively about, she never looked higher than eye level.

If anyone with a gun was out to get you, lady, Zeb thought, you'd be dead now.

No criminal, he decided, but in danger. The thought made him feel protective.

She left the child hidden behind a thick forsythia gone green with summer, went through the kitchen door alone to check the place out, then returned and hustled the little girl inside.

A strange way to enter a place where you were invited, Zeb mused. But of course they weren't invited. They were sneaking in.

It was nearly dusk when the woman emerged, alone. She looked angry and afraid and concerned all at once. She drove off with such

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urgency she left the doors to the parking area open behind her.

Zeb stayed at his post until full dark, but neither the woman nor the little girl reappeared. Convinced neither would show herself again before morning, Zebulon decided to resume his vigil at first light.

The TV was broadcasting a special bulletin to an empty room when Zeb arrived home. He would have bypassed it and headed straight for supper, but the little girl's blue eyes and silvery hair filled the screen.

"—fears his niece may have been kidnapped, and that her live-in sitter, Nancy Taylor, may be implicated." A picture of the dark-haired woman followed. "Mr. Forrester is offering a reward for information leading to the discovery of either Lauren Forrester or Nancy Taylor. Anyone having any information is asked to contact this station or your local police."

Zebulon liked the idea of a reward. But the picture of Eliot Forrester that followed Nancy Taylor's didn't sit well with him. He couldn't precisely say why. Forrester had an easy smile, an open face, an unblinking gaze, but looking at him, Zebulon shivered.

"That's one bad dude," he told himself. He was so unusually quiet during dinner that his mother commented on it and his two older brothers teased him about being a space cadet. He hardly noticed.

Something funny was going on at the Daughters of Elias, and his protection was needed. He amazed his family by putting himself to bed early, the better to rise at daylight and resume his guard post in the maple tree.

Sister Gabriela, ninety-two and still sound of mind, was returning from a midnight visit to the chapel when she saw an angel. With a sudden lifting of her heart, she hoped it was her guardian angel come to tell her she had finished her earthly course at last. She had longed for that call to her real, eternal home since the day of her First Communion, when she had realized how hollow the rewards of the world, and how complete the love of God.

Her heart almost stopped with rapture there in the dim corridor of the novitiate where she alone now slept, as the stairs to the third floor cells were beyond her. The angel was small as a child, all in white, with long shining hair falling like light around it; doubtless one of the Cherubim, like the angel who had come to Sister Catherine Laboure at night to lead her to the Blessed Virgin.

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Visions had been frequently come by in the days before Vatican II when the nuns kept vigorous fasts. There had been swooning and fainting spells in plenty, and imaginative souls had seen images of Christ in the clouds, in the garden, in the swirls of the wood paneling, in the tiles of the kitchen floor.

But this vision moved along the corridor, growing more distinct as it passed a window flooded with moonlight. Gabriela blinked to make sure she wasn't dreaming. When she opened her eyes, the vision was gone. Gabriela stayed where she was for a moment, so full of joy she hadn't the strength to move. I must tell Mother Mary Dominic when she returns from the conference tomorrow, she thought. But until then, she could believe in her vision undisturbed.

When morning came, she had forgotten it. The short memory of old age washed petty concerns and mysteries away each night, and Gabriela met the new day with the immediate joy of a child herself.

Zebulon, who was a child, forgot nothing. As soon as the sun touched his bed he awoke, the silver bird, the furtive young woman, and the telecast of the night before fresh in his mind. While his family slept, he stuffed himself with cereal, grabbed a box of raisins and his baseball cap, and headed for the convent.

At this hour, only mothers of young children and workers with early jobs were on the street. In Zebulon's neighborhood, summer was a time to rise late and retire late. But today there were white strangers about, stopping people. One stopped him.

"Want to make some easy money?" The man was big as a giant and looked as if he would crush Zeb as soon as speak to him. "Have you seen this girl?" He held out a picture of the silver bird.

"Yeah, I seen her," Zebulon said, afraid his start of recognition had given that much away. "Last night, on TV. Who wants to know?"

"Her uncle thinks she's been kidnapped. He'll pay big money to anyone who helps find her."

"You think she's around here?" Zeb asked, sounding as incredulous as he could. "Ain't nothing here for rich people."

"We followed the kidnapper's car to this street," the man said. "Did you see it? A brown Toyota?"

"Will I get money if I see it?" Zeb asked, not liking to tell an outright lie.

"Yes. Just call this number and ask for Harris." The man handed Zebulon a card. "Can you read that?"

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"I'm the best reader in the whole third grade." Zebulon was so profoundly insulted he wouldn't have told Harris the sun was shining even if he trusted him, which he didn't.

A stranger came out of the house next door. "No luck here," he reported to Harris.

"Keep ringing doorbells," Harris replied. "This is the last place I saw them. Make sure we get to every person and every building."

The convent was only three doors away. Zeb took off across the street. He had to round a house, crawl under the remains of a hedge, and scale a fence to reach his maple without being seen. Once there, he dropped inside the garden wall and made his way to the kitchen.

Sister Vincent was setting the table for breakfast. Zebulon, wondering how to reach the silver bird unnoticed, found that particular problem answered for him. The sound of Sister Vincent bustling about had scared her outdoors. He found her crouched under the forsythia. She scuttled backwards at his approach.

"Don't be scared. I won't hurt you," Zebulon promised. "There's a big dude name of Harris looking for you. He'll be here pretty soon. You want to see him?"

She looked at him with eyes full of fear and shook her head.

"That's what I figured." Zeb gave her his baseball cap. "You put your hair inside that. Too bad you have such a fancy dress. You too scared to hide out here while I go home and find you a disguise?"

Again she shook her head.

"Stay way under that bush," Zeb instructed, "and don't let out a peep until I get back. Got it?"

She nodded and disappeared beneath the overgrown forsythia. Zeb, feeling like a GI Joe on a secret mission, went down to Washington Street by the backyards in order not to approach his house from the direction of the convent. First he must bring the silver bird to a place of safety. Then he'd go visit Mother Mary Dominic and find out what was going on.

Breakfast over, Sister Vincent tackled the kitchen floor. It was spotlessly clean, but she enjoyed being assigned to kitchen duty and found great satisfaction in knowing that nobody cleaned as thoroughly as she did. With the nuns, including Sister Clare Francis, who was the cook, in chapel, Vincent enjoyed the feeling of being on her own in the vast first floor of the convent. She hummed a hymn as she vacuumed, preparatory to scrubbing and waxing—on her hands and knees, of course. Mother Mary Dominic insisted that

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modern cleaning agents had rendered such taxing labor obsolete, but Vincent enjoyed martyring herself in little things.

Mary Dominic insisted obedience was better than sacrifice, and love best of all. Whenever she caught Vincent overdoing things, she recommended an alternative: spending a half-hour with ancient Sister Peter, listening to her complain about her ailments, for instance, an exercise in charity that stretched Vincent to the limit.

Fortunately Mary Dominic wouldn't be back from her midwestern conference until afternoon, and in her absence Vincent could labor as she desired.

When she turned off the vacuum she heard the telephone ringing in the downstairs corridor and rushed to it with a little gasp. She had telephone duty today. Had the phone been ringing long enough to disturb the sisters in chapel? If so, Mary Dominic was sure to hear about it, and Vincent would be in for another lecture about obedience.

"You have reached the convent of the Daughters of Elias." Even Vincent could hear her tone was more harried than holy, and tried to sweeten it. "May I be of assistance?"

A slight hesitation at the other end. "May I speak with Mother Mary Dominic, please?"

"Mother is attending a conference on religious life and is not expected back until after two."

A longer hesitation. "May I speak with Sister Clare Francis?"

"Sister is in chapel until eleven." Vincent could call Clare Francis to the phone in case of emergency, but she wasn't going to suggest that unless the caller brought it up. She was enjoying her freedom too much to welcome any infringement.

"I'd like to leave them a message. I've left something of great value at the convent. If I'm not able to reclaim it by nightfall, please hand it over to Sergeant Mike McGuire of Station Nine and to no one else."

A retreatant who had left behind a watch or bracelet or other worldly bauble, Vincent thought as she wrote the message carefully word for word.

"Would you care to say what this item is?" she asked.

"They'll know when they see it. Please, please tell them they must not let it out of their hands. I'll come for it myself as soon as I can."

"It will be safe with us, whatever it is," Vincent said with her usual asperity. "Nuns are not thieves."

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"I am in danger," the voice continued. "That's why it's so important that no one but Mike should receive this item."

A retreatant who obviously had come looking for help with a drug or drinking problem, Vincent judged. "And may I have your name?"

A very long hesitation. Then, "Tell Sister Clare Francis it's Ada's daughter."

Ardor, Vincent wrote, in accord with the caller's Boston accent. "Is there a phone number where we might contact you, Miss Ardor?" Vincent asked, but the line was dead. Vincent left the message for Mary Dominic on her desk, where she would see it as soon as she returned, and stuck the message for Clare Francis on the refrigerator with a magnet. As she trundled the vacuum past the garden door, she saw a flash of legs.

Four legs. Two white and two black. Children's legs.

She burst through the door. "What are you children doing in here? This is sacred property! Get out or I'll call the police!"

That's what came of Clare Francis handing out cookies to all comers. Oh, Mother Mary Dominic would hear of this the minute she got home! Children in the cloister garden! "We keep very little for ourselves, Mother," Vincent would tell her. "I do think our privacy might be respected, even by the young juvenile delinquents we have for neighbors!"

The children fled into the trees and jumped down on the other side of the wall. "And stay out!" Vincent called after them.

They had left a rag near the forsythia bush. Vincent started after it, then changed her mind. Let Mary Dominic see for herself!

Anger gave her so much energy she had the floor finished long before she meant to. She was busy rearranging the cupboards when Clare Francis returned from chapel.

"I do wish you wouldn't upset my shelves, Sister," Clare Francis said for the millionth time. "I know just where everything is."

"There's a message for you on the refrigerator," Vincent said, not ceasing her work for a second. "And there were children in the garden. Playing in our garden! They even left some kind of rag out there!"

"I prefer my messages left in my mailbox," Clare Francis reminded Vincent, also for the millionth time. Sister Vincent seemed to have enormous difficulty complying with the regulation to leave all messages in each nun's individual box.

"You must stop encouraging the little beasts to come around," Vincent continued, not even hearing Clare's protest. "Though

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Mother is nearly as bad, having them in the parlor for cookies and lemonade!"

"The children here have few enough treats and only the street to play in," Clare replied patiently. "I'm sure Our Lord approves of any little thing we can do for them, Sister." She was scanning her message as she spoke and her face went white. "Ada's daughter!" she cried.

As if in a trance, Clare Francis wandered into the garden. The white rag caught her eye immediately.

A child's white dress. Clare shook her head. "Oh, Sister!" she mourned. "If only you had invited those children in instead of scaring them away!"—and she showed Vincent what she had found.

The thing of great value was the missing child. And she had been in their garden.

When Mary Dominic arrived home in the heat of the afternoon, Gabriela, who as portress could sit in a chair by the front door and quietly say her prayers for most of the day, greeted her joyfully.

"Mike McGuire and a young lady are waiting for you in parlor one," she said. "Two gentlemen are waiting for you in parlor two. Sister Vincent and Sister Clare Francis both wish to speak with you, and I myself would like a word, Mother, at your convenience."

Mary Dominic sighed inwardly. There went her hope of a few minutes alone with a glass of iced tea.

She listened first to Gabriela's tale of an angel in the night. "I had forgotten, Mother, but I saw the angel again this morning. It was in the air above the kitchen garden, Mother. Then it disappeared."

Gently, Mary Dominic reminded Gabriela against giving too much weight to signs and wonders and cautioned her to keep her experience to herself. Not that Gabriela wasn't holy enough for visions; scarcely three months after Gabriela began praying for Russia, the Soviet Union disintegrated.

Next she tackled Sister Vincent. She prayed for patience as Vincent ranted about the children in the garden as if they had been members of Cromwell's army intent on taking the convent apart stone by stone. Once again she cautioned Vincent to seize opportunities to practice charity, and suggested she spend more time meditating on the Passion of Christ.

Clare Francis arrived bearing a pitcher of iced tea and a tray of small sandwiches. "I thought you might need some refreshment, Mother, after your trip."

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Mary Dominic always found Clare herself refreshing. Down to earth and devoted to Christ, Clare expressed her vocation in loving actions. Not given to mystical experiences, she was overwhelmed when the Berlin Wall came down while Germany was the country assigned her for prayers. Humility forbade her speaking of it, but she glowed for days.

Now she told her story clearly and calmly. "I wanted to call Mike McGuire when I realized the missing child had been here," she ended, "but not without your permission, Mother."

Next Mary Dominic heard from the two gentlemen—a Buford Harris, and Eliot Forrester. Harris, nearly as wide as he was tall and all of it muscle, dominated her small office physically. Eliot Forrester, dapper and outwardly charming, exerted a strong force of his own.

Although she tried never to judge anyone, Mary Dominic didn't care for either of these men. Evil seemed to surround them; worse, to exude from them, releasing a palpable poison into the atmosphere.

"We traced Taylor to this street," Harris, the big one, concluded. "We're pretty sure she had the kid with her."

At that point Forrester leaned forward, a false smile making his features grotesque rather than charming. "This is the only building we haven't searched," he said. "I'm aware that might be distressing to the sisters, so I am willing to make compensation with an extremely generous donation." He sat back with the air of a man deeply confident that money can buy anything. He had never met anyone who was indifferent to its value.

Mary Dominic answered with a crafty smile of her own. "If you can be patient for an hour while I make arrangements, I'm sure we can conclude this affair successfully."

She left them in her office and crossed to the parlor where Mike McGuire and Nancy Taylor waited. There she heard the remainder of the tale.

"He killed his own brother," Nancy said. "I saw him do it. Worse, Lauren saw it, too. She hasn't spoken a word since. Is she still here?"

"I'm afraid not," Mary Dominic said, touched by the desolation that swept over Nancy on hearing the bad news. "But if you will both come with me, I think I know where to find her." She couldn't help noticing how well Mike and Nancy looked together: Mike, with his red coloring, all bright flame; Nancy all smoke, with her black hair and deep grey eyes. If marriages were truly made in heaven, a little prayer to get one started along the road would never hurt.

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A moment later, Mary Dominic led them three doors down the street. "Zebulon lives here," she told Mike as they let themselves in a scruffy front door that hadn't locked in years. There was no intercom system. Mike, breaking into a grin, yelled up the stairwell, "Zeb? It's Mike McGuire and Mother Mary Dominic."

At the mention of Mary Dominic's name there was a rustling behind the walls. Doors opened and faces peeked out, smiling at the honor of her presence. Zeb leaned over a third-floor banister, beaming. At each landing people came out to say hello, to thank Mary Dominic for helping them with everything from finding runaway kids to dealing with City Hall.

"They aren't this glad to see me when I come here on my own," Mike commented, impressed.

Zeb's mother, a plump woman with a cheerful face, asked apprehensively on seeing Mike, "What's wrong, Officer? Have one of my boys done something they shouldn't?"

She put her arms protectively around Zebulon.

"Zeb's done something very right," Mike said. "He's saved a little girl's life. How about getting her for us, Zeb?"

"She don't look like a silver bird no more," he apologized as he led forth Lauren, dressed in one of his tops and shorts, her hair hidden by a baseball cap. On seeing Nancy, Lauren ran into her arms.

"It's all right now," Nancy soothed her. "The police are going to arrest Eliot and lock him up. He can't hurt you now."

Lauren shuddered. "He shot my Daddy," she told Mike, and burst into tears.

"We'll fix him," Mike assured her. "I promise."

A month after Eliot Forrester's internationally publicized trial, Mike and Nancy paid a social visit to Mother Mary Dominic. Mike was beaming and Nancy aglow, and Mary Dominic said at once, "I'm so happy for both of you!"

Mike laughed. "I told you she saw it coming," he told Nancy. Teasing, he added, "We're really doing it for Lauren."

"Eliot didn't know that his brother had made me her legal guardian," Nancy explained. "He didn't know he'd made Lauren his legal heir, either. She's a very wealthy little girl."

"We didn't want her to grow up spoiled," Mike added, "so we thought she should have a houseful of sisters and brothers."

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"And I thought police protection would be a good idea, in case Eliot ever manages to buy his way out of jail," Nancy said.

"I see." Mary Dominic couldn't help smiling. "Love has nothing to do with it."

Mike and Nancy looked at one another. "I wouldn't go quite that far," Mike said.

"I wouldn't go anywhere near that far," Nancy amended, and stepped into his arms.

# SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

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**a *NEW* short story by**

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EQMM *is delighted to once again feature a story by four-time Readers Award winner Clark Howard. In the months since Mr. Howard last appeared on our pages, he has been hard at work on his soon-to-be-published book* Love's Blood *(Crown Publishers), a factual account of the 1976 Columbo killings, based on interviews he conducted with an accessory to the crime, a young woman convicted of aiding her lover in the slayings of her mother, father, and thirteen-year-old brother. The compassion with which Clark Howard writes about the victims, and perpetrators, of crimes makes this a book to look for; in the meantime, we're happy to present another of his unforgettable stories. . . .*

# THE LONG DROP

***by CLARK HOWARD***

Pell was the last remaining passenger aboard the twenty-one-seat commuter plane as it banked into an approach at its final destination of the day. Around the little regional airport below, Pell saw through the window a broad, flat plateau of land, barren and brown, devoid of anything except the grimmest, most determined mesquite. Behind this depressing landscape, just minutes earlier, the commuter plane had flown over verdant cattle ranches, lush with waves of rich prairie grass, alive with ranging beef, dotted with windmills, feeding stations, rolling irrigators. But all that had ended, abruptly, a hundred miles south, and now there was nothing below the slowly descending aircraft, nothing left as far as the Canadian border, except this wasteland.

A tundra, Pell thought. What an appropriate place for the Indian to die. It was halfway to hell already.

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On the ground, Pell was greeted by a middle-aged, uniformed man who identified himself as Captain Farrell. "The superintendent would've met you hisself, but an unexpected security matter came up. Right down here is where you get your luggage. Good flight?"

"The jet to Salt Lake was fine," Pell replied. "I can't say much for the commuter."

"Yeah, it's a real puddle-jumper, all right," the captain allowed. "Only way to get here, though, 'thout driving two days."

Leaving the terminal, the captain carried Pell's two-suiter while Pell himself took a round, black wooden container shaped much like a hatbox, with a single handle in the center of its top. The captain eyed the box curiously.

"Is what I think it is in there?" he asked slyly.

"Probably," Pell said.

The captain nodded conspiratorially. "The superintendent said you was bringing your own. That's what I call professionalism, by God."

Pell did not have to respond to that because they reached Farrell's vehicle, a white Chevrolet pickup with an official seal on each door. With Pell's suitcase and the black box in the truck bed, Farrell guided the vehicle onto a two-lane highway that cut straight across the plank-flat mesa as if a draftsman had put it there with a ruler. Farrell's pickup was the only vehicle on the highway. Pell watched as the speedometer needle moved to fifty, sixty, seventy.

"The super said you was a little surprised about the Indian," Farrell commented, hands casually on the steering wheel as if he were resting on a fence.

"Yes, I was," Pell acknowledged.

"We were too, actually," Farrell told him with a chuckle. "That's why the panic to find you. The super, he was one relieved man when he finally located you."

Gradually, a slight outgrowth of some kind appeared on the horizon ahead of them, and as Pell squinted at it, he could see it slowly take form as a town.

"That's Mankota," Farrell said. "We're just the other side."

Mankota was a three-block town. The block in the middle was where the drugstore, butcher shop, A & P market, bakery, shoe repair, five-and-dime, and other essential businesses were situated. In the block on the south of that were the municipal offices, county library, courthouse, and a small city park with a statue of George

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Armstrong Custer in its center. The block to the north was the most rundown of the three: a couple of small cafes, a pool hall, liquor store, boarded-up movie house, self-service laundry, and a motel called the Wigwam.

Farrell's pickup truck was through town in half a minute, catching the solitary stoplight on green. A mile farther on, there came into view a small complex of low-structured buildings surrounded by a cyclone fence topped with razor wire.

"I expected it to be larger," Pell commented.

"That ain't us," Farrell said. "That there's the women's prison. That's us over on this side ahead."

Now Pell saw an ugly rock-and-concrete brute of a wall rising thirty feet from the flats, with nothing visible behind it except a water tower on which white block letters read: STATE PENITENTIARY. Gun towers extended up from the corners like threatening bedposts. A set of fifteen-foot iron-bar gates was the only interruption in the blunt defiance of the formidable barrier. Its starkness made the desolate mesa around it seem almost scenic.

As Farrell turned off the highway onto a blacktop approach road, Pell got a closer look at the wall and said, as much to himself as to his escort, "Talk about primitive."

Farrell threw him a quick frown. "Oh, she's old, all right. Built back in eighteen and eighty-two when Chester Alan Arthur was president. But she does the job all right. Yessir, she does the job."

As they got nearer the wall, Pell thought: What a monstrosity. Maybe the Indian was closer to hell than just halfway.

In the reception area of the superintendent's office, Captain Farrell set Pell's suitcase against the wall and introduced a woman who rose from her desk. "This here's Alma Dent, the super's secretary; she'll take care of you until the super gets back. Alma, this here's Mr. Pell."

Alma Dent was plain and pretty at the same time. She wore no makeup and her hair was parted on one side and combed back in almost male fashion. From where her collarbone centered, as far down as the top button of her blouse allowed Pell to see, there was a rush of freckles. She was a touch fleshy, maybe five pounds overweight for her height, most of it in the hips. Her eyes were a flat, dark grey, the color of drying cement.

"Superintendent Mahl is on his way back right now," Alma Dent said. "You can come on into his office and I'll get you some coffee, if

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you'd like. Do you want to leave that with your suitcase?" She pointed to the black box he was carrying.

"I'll take it in the office with me," Pell said. "Superintendent Mahl will want to see it, I'm sure."

"Oh yes, of course," she said, as if suddenly realizing what it was they were talking about.

Alma led him into the inner office and had just given him a Styrofoam cup of coffee when the superintendent hurried in. Pell was surprised to see that Mahl was a good fifteen years younger than himself, probably no more than thirty.

"Mr. Pell, I'm terribly sorry about not meeting your plane myself," Mahl said, coming forward to offer his hand. "We had a little flare-up over in D Block, that's our high-power max security tier, and I had to attend to it personally." As he shook Pell's hand, he added, "I was very relieved to find you, Mr. Pell. This thing we're suddenly facing could've turned out to be real messy."

Still might, Pell thought. "I hope I can help you out," he said.

Alma Dent put a cup of coffee on Mahl's desk as he sat down, then retreated from the office. Pell noticed that she did not close the door when she left, nor did Mahl ask her to.

"Well," Mahl said, resting his forearms on the desk and encircling his cup with both hands. "Is that," he nodded at the black box, "what you mentioned on the phone?"

"Yes." Pell lifted the box and set it carefully on one corner of the superintendent's desk. From his wallet, he removed a single key and unlocked it. As he raised the lid up, Mahl half rose to look.

Coiled like some exotic snake inside the box was a shiny, pale yellow, twenty-two-foot rope. Pell pulled one end of it out for Mahl to examine.

"I made this rope myself. It has three strands: one of abaca, usually called Manila hemp, from the Philippine Islands; one of henequen, from the Yucatan; and one of sisal, from Indonesia. No man-made fibers at all: no nylon, saran, polypropylene—none of that. Those last longer, but their elasticity is greater. This rope won't stretch half an inch; it's been suspended over the ceiling beams of my garage with 150-pound weights attached to each end to eliminate any spring or bounce. Every week it's been lubricated with mutton tallow that I buy from a Chicago slaughterhouse." Pell paused to take a sip of coffee as Mahl fingered the rope end. "Actually, it's fortunate that I even have this rope. It's the last one I ever made and a crime museum in London has been trying to buy it from

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me. Naturally, I'd rather see it used for its intended purpose than put on display. Although I may sell it to them after."

"Will it have more value then?" Mahl asked curiously.

"I should think so," Pell said. "Particularly if this is really the last one. Would you mind telling me again how this situation came about? I'm still not altogether clear on it."

Superintendent Mahl dropped the rope end back into the black box. "Just a ridiculous series of events," he said irritably. "This Indian—he's a Northern Cheyenne named Eddie Eye-of-the-Moose; just Eddie Moose, for short—anyway, he killed a white man back in nineteen sixty-eight—twenty-four years ago, can you believe it? There were mitigating circumstances: he was in the backseat of a car with a white girl, her boyfriend caught them, they'd all been drinking—that kind of situation.

"Anyway, Eddie got life and was doing his time right here; he'd been in seven or eight years, had a fair record, no serious disciplines. Then—the cousin of the guy he'd killed got sent up on a two-year sentence for vehicular manslaughter. Well, naturally, speculation started up right away that he was going to go after Eddie Moose to get even for his cousin. So Eddie bought himself a shank—a home-made knife—from some con in the machine shop, and started packing it. The cousin, when he got here, fell in with a biker gang that was loaded with contraband weapons. He started giving Eddie Moose some bad eye contact out on the yard, and Eddie gave it right back; he had to, every Indian in the place was watching. Finally, the cousin walked up to Eddie one day and got right in his face. Eddie didn't think twice, he just dropped the shank out of his shirt sleeve, stuck it in the cousin's stomach, and walked halfway around him with it.

"Turned out that the cousin wasn't armed at all," Mahl said disgustedly. "He was still on probation with the biker gang and they hadn't given him a weapon. So Eddie Moose went on trial for murder again. This time he was sentenced to hang. He came back and settled in on Death Row. There were six others on the Row at the time; they all eventually were commuted to life—except Eddie. Then the state adopted lethal injection as its capital punishment method; new condemned men began to arrive, some got reprieved, some got the needle, some got new trials—and all the while the Legal Defense Fund is keeping Eddie Moose alive with one appeal after another. Sixteen more years passed. Eddie Moose turned fat and middle-aged, and everybody eventually took it for granted that he'd never swing.

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Then one day I opened my mail and there was an execution order signed by the governor. I had forty-five days to carry out the sentence. There hadn't been a hanging in the state for twenty years, or anyplace in the whole country for fifteen. That's when I started looking for a hangman." The superintendent drummed his fingertips on the padded arm of his chair. "I've got five days left. Can it be done?"

"Probably," Pell said, pursing his lips for a moment to consider. "How's your carpentry shop?"

"First rate. I've already had a kind of makeshift scaffold built; I don't know if it's adequate or not."

"I'll have to look at it and the condemned man," Pell said. "If the drop is right, maybe it'll do."

"The drop?"

"The distance the condemned man falls before the noose stops him. It's determined by weight, mostly, but also by general physical condition, musculature, age. The drop has to be accurately calculated to within two inches in order to break the person's neck. If it's too short, the fall won't snap the neck and the result will be protracted strangulation, which is always messy. If the drop is too long, the rope can rip the head right off—which is even messier. I'll take a look at your scaffold in the morning to determine if it needs modifying. Meanwhile, it's been a long travel day; where do I stay?"

"You're tired, of course. I'll have my secretary take you into town to the motel." Mahl turned toward the open door. "Alma—!"

She appeared instantly, as if waiting to be called.

In a prison pool-car, Alma Dent drove Pell, his suitcase, and his box of rope back toward Mankota. The sun had gone down, leaving a blue-gray haze that would quickly meld into the kind of pitch darkness that is found only on the Great Plains; a darkness of the blind. Pell was staring out at the dissolving light when the woman spoke to him.

"It's very complicated, isn't it?" she asked.

"Excuse me?"

"Hanging someone. It's very complicated."

"It can be, yes," Pell acknowledged.

"How long have you been doing it?"

"Well, I don't actually do it anymore," he said. "I mean, I'm doing it *now*, because it's there to be done. But I haven't really worked at it in a number of years. My real job is—"

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"I know what your real job is," she said, not seeming to mind interrupting him. "I'm the one who found you in that little town in Louisiana. Tracked you down on the telephone. It took me three weeks. Superintendent Mahl only contacted you after *I'd* done all the work."

The line of her mouth had tightened a little as she spoke. Pell wondered if it was general feminine resentment or if it went deeper than that, if it was personal between her and Mahl.

"What I meant," Alma rephrased it, "was how long had you been a hangman before you quit doing it on a regular basis?"

"Oh. About eight years, I think."

She was quiet for the next mile, then asked, "Do my questions bother you? I mean, tell me if they do."

"No, I don't suppose they bother me." Pell studied her profile. "What else do you want to know?"

"How did you get started at it?" she asked at once, as if she were springing a trap.

Resting his head back, again seeing the little town of Mankota slowly rise from the hazy highway, Pell said, "I was a corrections officer at a prison in Delaware. One day I was assigned to assist the state hangman in preparing for an execution. He was nearing retirement age, been at it a long time; actually, he worked in several states, wherever he was needed. I guess in his time he'd probably dropped five or six dozen men—"

"Any women?" Alma interrupted again.

"I don't know for sure. Probably."

"Have you? Any women?"

Pell paused a beat before answering, and they were both aware of his hesitation. "Yes, one," he said. He looked back out the window. "Anyway, the old man taught me all there was to know about the noose and the long drop, as he called it, and when he retired I was offered the job. I took it." Pell sighed quietly. "When the needle came along—lethal injection—I was out of a job. I didn't want to go back to being an ordinary guard. A sales rep for one of the rope companies tipped me to the plant manager's job where you found me. It's basically a cordage manufacturer: twine and other light fibers, mostly using flax. But we do a little hemp work for marine rope and such. It's not a bad job, really."

Alma threw him a quick knowing look that he managed to catch. It said: *You're not kidding anybody.* Pell let it pass. Maybe, he thought, she hates her job, too.

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Just inside Mankato, in the seedy block, Alma pulled into one of the parking spaces at the Wigwam Motel.

"You're already checked in, Mr. Pell. Just pick up your key at the desk."

As he opened the car door, Pell glanced at the freckles disappearing under her blouse and said, "Couldn't we drop the 'mister'? My first name is Bert."

"It's actually Herbert," she corrected.

He shrugged self-consciously. "I never cared much for Herbert."

"I rather like it," Alma Dent said. " 'Bert' is a little too flip for you."

"Come on." He hoped he didn't sound as if he were whining. Sometimes his voice had a tendency to do that.

"I'll pick you up at eight in the morning, Herbert," she said, as if the matter were now closed. "Keep track of your meals so we can reimburse you."

Pell dragged his suitcase and rope box off the backseat and closed the door.

"Goodnight, Herbert," Alma Dent said, and drove away.

Superintendent Mahl turned Pell over to Captain Farrell the next day for his visit to Death Row to see Eddie Moose. Two burly guards accompanied them, one carrying a bathroom scale. The condemned man was about Pell's own age, but had gone to pasty fat sitting on the Row. Where Pell was still lean, with a straight line of jaw, Eddie Moose had jowls and a belly. Pell could see, even before the cell door was open, that he had all the rope he needed.

"Rack open number twelve!" Captain Farrell called to the control-unit officer sitting behind a thick, bulletproof glass wall. "Step out here, Eddie," he said to the prisoner as the barred door grated open.

Eddie Moose came out, sullen, on edge, maybe dangerous, maybe not, depending on how much imprudent boldness he could muster. "This ain't right, Captain," he started complaining at once. "Not after all these goddamned years. Everybody knows it ain't right. *You* know it ain't right."

"Step on that scale, Eddie," the captain ordered, ignoring the Indian's grievance.

Eddie Moose backed up to the bars, his hands closing into fists. "I ain't cooperating, Captain. This ain't right—"

The two guards automatically put hands on the truncheons that swung from their belts.

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"This is for your own good, Eddie," the captain said. "Mr. Pell here has to know how much you weigh so's he'll know how long to make the rope. He told me on the way over here that otherwise it could pull your head clean off. When your people come to get you, why, you don't want to be in two pieces, do you?"

Eddie swallowed and turned fearful eyes to Pell. "That right, mister? Could that happen?"

"I'm afraid it could," Pell confirmed.

Eddie got on the scale.

"Two thirty-three," one of the guards read the indicator.

Pell did not bother to feel the Indian's body for muscle tone; there was none. Eddie Moose was all fat, most of it between the chest and the knees. When he dropped, it would be like hanging a huge bag of gelatin. Pell would have to be extra careful about potential kinks in any of the rope strands; just one slight twist and Eddie Moose would spin like a top.

"You ain't gonna let it pull my head off, are you, mister?" Eddie asked Pell. There was terror in his eyes and voice.

"No, I won't," Pell said.

"My mother is still alive, man. She couldn't take that."

"It'll be all right," Pell assured him.

As Pell, Captain Farrell, and the guards walked away, Eddie Moose, back in his cell, reiterated the unfairness of it all. "This ain't right, Captain!" he yelled. "Not after all these years! You know it ain't right—"

From Death Row, Farrell took Pell to an old two-story stone building in a far corner of the prison compound.

"This here used to be the tag plant, back when cars got new license plates every year. Now that the motor vehicle department just issues them little stickers, why, we've cut back to making plates just for new cars. Only got two punch-presses operating, over in the shoe fact'ry. The super thought this would be a good place for the gallows."

When they got inside, Pell saw that half of the interior, in the front, was a loft; the rear of the old building was open from ground to roof. In the center near the back wall was a scaffold that looked for all the world like the bottom section of an oil derrick, with a trapdoor in its floor. As Pell approached it, he smelled the clean scent of new lumber. Putting a hand on one supporting beam of the framework, he found it solid, sturdy.

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"The super had it copied from one of our archive photos," Farrell explained. "Even got thirteen steps, just like the original."

Pell did not have the heart to tell Farrell that it was not really necessary to have thirteen steps leading up to the trapdoor, any more than it was necessary to have thirteen loops in the noose. That was all nonsense, myth. It was the drop that mattered—and only the drop. In his head, Pell had already calculated the drop he would need for this one. The formula was eight feet of drop for a weight of 196 pounds. For every seven pounds over or under that weight, the drop was increased or decreased two inches. Eddie Moose was thirty-seven pounds overweight, so Pell had shortened the drop ten and three-quarter inches.

"I'll need seven feet, one and one-quarter inches for my drop," he advised the captain. "Eight to eight-and-a-half feet between the trapdoor and the floor should do it. Any more than that and your doctor will have to stand on a chair to pronounce him dead." Pell stood directly under the trapdoor. "This looks pretty close. How much is it exactly?"

Farrell took a small spiral notebook from his shirt pocket and flipped through several pages. "Eight foot two," he said.

"We're in business then. All we need is a gallows tree."

"What's that?" Farrell asked.

"An upright frame with a crosspiece," Pell replied drily. "To attach the rope to."

"Oh, sure. Of course. Wonder why that wasn't in the archive photo?"

"Lots of old-time scaffolds were outside," Pell told him. "They just used a tree limb or a lamppost, something like that." He bobbed his chin at the trapdoor. "Center it right above the trap. Make it eight two high, same as the distance to the floor. How long will it take?"

"Have her for you in the morning," Farrell said.

"Round me up five fifty-pound bags of sand, too," Pell requested.

"Sure, to test your rope," Farrell assumed.

"To test *your* gallows," Pell corrected evenly. "My rope will be perfect."

Pell was noticeably cool toward Farrell all the way back to the superintendent's office.

Test his rope, indeed.

Amateurs.

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When Alma was driving him back into Mankota, Pell asked, "Are you free this evening?"

She looked at him with an expression that darkened. "Of course I'm free." Her eyebrows came closer together. "What has Farrell told you about me?"

"Farrell? Nothing. Nothing at all," Pell protested innocently. The question caught him completely off guard.

"Why would you ask if I was free?" she wanted to know. "What makes you think I'm not free?"

"Look, I didn't mean *free* exactly," Pell found himself almost pleading. "I meant, like *available*. You know, maybe for supper."

"Oh." Alma glanced at him and her frown dissolved. "I'm sorry. The way you used the word 'free,' I misunderstood."

"I was trying to find out if you were married or had a boyfriend, that's all."

"I don't have a boyfriend and I'm not married." A slight, knowing smile played at her lips. "But you are. You're married."

"Yes," Pell admitted.

"I found that out when I was tracking you down. Your wife's name is Heather." The slight smile almost became a smirk. "Herbert and Heather. That's cute."

"Did you also find out," he asked, a little defensively, "that she's left me?"

It took Alma by surprise. "No."

He nodded, rather curtly. "The neighbors think she went back to Delaware to care for her sick mother. Actually, she's gone for good." Pell sighed somewhat resignedly. "She never got used to small-town southern living. The humidity gave her sinus problems, she was very fair-skinned and the mosquitoes went after her in droves during the summer, but the main thing was she didn't seem to be able to get pregnant. I don't know if it was her fault or mine; we never got up enough nerve to be tested to find out. Anyway, she finally went back to college and got a degree in education. Then she left."

"Are you divorced?"

"No. I suppose we'll get around to that eventually."

"What time do you want to have supper?" Alma asked, changing the subject entirely.

The only "decent" place to eat in Mankota, Alma told him that evening, was one block off the main highway through town, facing the little park with the statue of Custer. It was an old two-story

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frame residence converted into a supper-only restaurant called the Prairie House, run by two spinster sisters who had inherited it years earlier. The tablecloths were lightly starched for crispness, napkins were rolled in pewter rings, a kerosene lantern flickered at each table, and the walls were adorned with intricate, exquisite needlepoint which was *not* for sale. In New York, the place would have been instantly trendy; in Mankota, it was simply "decent."

"There's no menu," Alma warned. "You eat whatever the old biddies have cooked during the day. They serve family-style from a steam cart."

Pell and Alma sat at a cozy table for two next to an open window that let in a faint breeze and a hint of the wild snowberry that bloomed close to town where it could find water. The scent of it and the ambiance of the little restaurant made Pell relax a little. "One of the reasons I tried to be so careful about asking you out," he told her, "was that I assumed you must have known I was married. Also, I thought you and Mahl might have something going."

Alma's mouth dropped open. "Me? Have something going with the *warden?* You've got to be kidding."

Pell immediately wondered about the intensity of her tone, the acrimony so obvious in the word *warden,* as if the position—or the man—were unwholesome in some way, repugnant. This woman, Pell thought, became cross very easily—yet he found himself more attracted to her every moment. He tried to think of something to talk about that would not annoy her.

"Are you a native of Mankota?" he asked, and wondered at once if by the word "native" she might think he was asking whether she had Indian blood. But to his relief the question did not offend her.

"No, I'm originally from the eastern part of the state, a place called Chandler. I came here when I was seventeen."

"You must like it to have stayed on."

Alma shrugged. "It's all right. I plan to leave in three more years."

She seemed very specific about the three years, but Pell decided not to ask why. Instead, he chose to be candid about his interest in her. Touching her hand across the table, he said, "I have to tell you something. I've been attracted to you since I first walked into the superintendent's office."

Alma quickly drew her hand away. "We both have a stressful few days coming up, Herbert," she said. "I don't think we ought to overload ourselves emotionally."

"Does that mean you feel the same way?"

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"I feel—something," Alma admitted. She looked down at the table, the hand she had drawn away now toying with her napkin ring. "It's something I haven't felt in a long time. So long that it seems almost like the first time again." She straightened her shoulders. "But the time isn't right to talk about it."

"When will the time be right?" He was warming inside.

"After the execution," she said.

Her tone sounded curiously neutral to Pell. Almost like she was saying after the parade or after the picnic.

The next morning, Superintendent Mahl said, "The media is beginning to arrive in town. I'd like to solicit your cooperation in trying to keep this from becoming a three-ring circus."

Pell nodded assent. "Whatever I can do to help."

"I'd appreciate it if you'd grant no interviews—"

"I never do," Pell interjected.

"Good. From now on, I'm going to have Alma take you in and out of the institution by way of the employee gate in the rear wall. Everyone will be alerted to treat you just like another member of the staff. As a matter of fact, I might even have Captain Farrell issue you a uniform to make your coming and going less conspicuous. Would that bother you?"

"I suppose not."

"Alma told me you used to be a corrections officer back in Delaware. That's good. If some clever reporter happens to corner you in town, you'll seem very convincing. The institution's official position is going to be one of 'No comment,' except through an appointed Department of Corrections spokesperson. No one here, including myself, will make any statements." Mahl sat back, pursing his lips thoughtfully. It was clear to Pell that the superintendent was pondering something. "There's one more thing," Mahl finally said. "The Indians. Are you a superstitious man, Mr. Pell?"

"No more than ordinary, I don't think," Pell replied. He shifted slightly in his chair, feeling suddenly uneasy.

"We've received word from the Bureau of Indian Affairs that a contingent of fifty or sixty Northern Cheyenne from the Lame Deer reservation is on its way to Mankota. Eddie Moose's mother is among them. They plan to stage protest demonstrations both in town and in front of the institution."

Pell shrugged. "That's par for the course. There's always *some* group opposing any execution."

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"The Northern Cheyenne are a little different from your average protestors," Mahl told him. "We've had them here before for lethal injection executions. That's why I asked if you were superstitious. You see, they'll have a medicine man with them—"

"Medicine man?"

"—and he'll be looking for specific people: myself, Captain Farrell; he's sure to try and find out who the executioner is."

"Why?" Pell asked. "For what?"

"To cast a spell." Mahl was trying to keep his tone matter-of-fact, but Pell detected a slight edge. "It's all just a lot of hocus-pocus, of course. An Indian with some paint on his face, shaking beans in a gourd, spreading campfire ashes on the ground, making noises like some woman in labor. I hope you won't let it unnerve you."

"I assure you I won't," Pell said. He made the statement mostly for Alma's benefit, knowing she was at her desk outside the, as usual, open office door. But in his stomach he was already beginning to feel agitation.

A *spell?*

After supper that evening, Pell and Alma sat on a bench near the statue of Custer in the little park. Alma had been irritated since they left the prison.

"He's got his nerve, making a crack like that," she said testily of Superintendent Mahl. "If *he* ever had to go through labor, he'd probably scream his head off."

Pell was also a little annoyed, but for another reason. "I think I should have been told about this medicine man business when I was offered the job. Did you know about it?"

"Of course I knew," Alma said, almost as an aside. "The Indians do it all the time; it's nothing new."

"It's new to me," Pell grumbled. He was accustomed to hanging people in a more civilized atmosphere.

"Men," Alma said disgustedly, going back to Mahl. "Every time they want to belittle or ridicule something, they look for a feminine comparison."

"Exactly how does this medicine man go about casting one of his spells?" Pell asked, ignoring her plaint. Alma sighed dramatically.

"Exactly the way Mahl *said* he did," she replied with a certain exasperation. "Only thing is, he does a little dance while he's shaking the gourd and chanting like a woman in labor. And he'll try to sprinkle some ashes on your shoes. It's painless, Herbert, really."

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They fell silent, heads back, looking up at the black void of the plains' sky. There was a sliver of moon up there, but it kept disappearing behind high nimbostratus clouds that were supposed to bring rain later that night. Pell's thoughts turned to a table of five television people who had been in the Prairie House when he and Alma had dinner.

"I suppose," he said without enthusiasm, "I'd better start wearing that guard's uniform tomorrow."

"Might be a good idea," Alma allowed.

"Farrell said if anybody asked why I was staying at the motel, to say I had transferred from the minimum-security prison and hadn't found a place to live yet. I guess the motel is going to be full of media people by this time tomorrow."

"I guess."

Pell found her hand in the darkness between them. "I'm sorry if I've been touchy tonight."

"Me too."

"This medicine man thing has got me a little on edge."

"I know. You're not used to it."

He let go of her hand and put an arm around her shoulders. Her face turned to meet his and they kissed, longingly but gently, very gently. Then Alma pulled away.

"We've got to wait," she reminded him. "We've got to wait until our minds are clear of all this other."

"I need you now, Alma—"

"No. We've got to wait."

Pell drew his arm back. He could tell by the firmness in her voice that he had no alternative. Me and Eddie Moose, he thought.

Waiting for it.

The next day, wearing the guard's uniform, Pell inspected the gallows tree and found it appropriately sturdy and properly positioned. Having brought the rope box into the prison with him that morning, he opened it and sat on the edge of the trapdoor with his legs dangling through it, and while Farrell and two guards watched in fascination, proceeded to tie a double-back, upward-looped hangman's noose—with thirteen loops in it to make Farrell happy. It was completed in three minutes, after which Pell removed from the bottom of the box a bottle of thick, creamy liquid and with his fingertips began to work it into the length of rope that slipped through the knot.

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"Mutton tallow," he told Farrell and the guards, reading their curiosity. "Makes for a nice, smooth-sliding noose."

It was now the day before the execution and as a routine precaution, Superintendent Mahl had locked down the prison. All normal activities were suspended and the inmates were kept in their cells and fed from sandwich carts. Eddie Moose had been removed from Death Row and was housed in a special holding cell adjoining a large private visiting room. The death-watch guards sent Mahl and Farrell an hourly report on the condemned man's visitors.

"His mother's been with him all day," Farrell told Pell when the latest report came, "along with a sister and 'bout a dozen others claiming to be cousins. There's two flatbed truckloads more parked outside the front gate. The medicine man's with that bunch."

"What's he look like?" Pell asked curiously.

"Like you'd expect a painted heathen to look," Farrell grunted. "We've seen his kind before. Ever' time we put the needle to a blood or a breed, don't matter from which tribe, they just can't resist making a big powwow out of it."

"You don't believe in any of that 'casting a spell' business, do you?" There was concern in Pell's voice, but the guard captain missed it.

"Not a damn bit," Farrell declared.

When Pell had his rope ready, he pulled the trapdoor closed, opened the noose wide, and laid its loop across the trapdoor. "Okay, let's get the sandbags over here," he said.

Farrell's guards brought over the five fifty-pound burlap bags and stacked them on the rope. When they were in place, Pell slipped the rope through its knot and drew it snug. Climbing an open stepladder under the gallows tree, he wound the other end of the rope twice around the upper beam, then expertly tied it fast with a bowline knot that was slip-proof.

When all was ready to his satisfaction, Pell walked purposefully across the scaffold and without ceremony threw the lever that controlled the trapdoor. The door dropped open and two hundred fifty pounds of sand plummeted downward. The new wood of the gallows tree squeaked like a hungry piglet, and the scaffold itself swayed half an inch and made a brief crunching sound—but it all held. The sandbags were stopped without even a full spin, twelve inches from the floor below the scaffold. That, after the rope was adjusted above, would be where Eddie Moose's bound feet would stop.

"Professionalism, by God!" Farrell said in admiration.

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The noose worked so well that the guards could not release the sandbags without slitting one open and letting its contents spill out to release the tension. When the bags were out of the noose and the sand was being swept up, Pell climbed back up the ladder to untie the rope from the gallows tree.

"Couldn't you just leave it up there overnight?" Farrell asked.

Pell shook his head. "I'll feel better if the rope is in its box."

It took him a couple of minutes to work the bowline knot loose; the weight of the sandbags had tightened it considerably. When it was finally loose, as Pell was pulling it around the gallows tree, it suddenly caught. Thinking it was a tangle, Pell tugged gently at it. The rope would not give.

"What the hell—?" Pell said under his breath. Reaching around and under the thick wood, his fingers found the rope snagged on the head of a nail that had not been driven all the way into the wood.

Pell felt his mouth go dry. *A snag.* The absolute worst thing, next to cutting with a knife or chopping with a hatchet, that could happen to a good rope. Nimbly working his fingers to release the rope, he drew it quickly around and inspected it. What he saw made him feel ill. Two of the five slivers of fiber used to make the Manila hemp strand were torn. Pell swallowed drily.

"Anything wrong?" Farrell asked, looking up at him.

"No, nothing's wrong," Pell said quickly, composing himself. "Just giving it a final inspection."

"Professionalism," Farrell said again, nodding sagely to his guards.

Pell brought the rope down and as he was coiling it back in the box, took a closer look at the two torn fibers. Thankfully, they were not completely separated; they would not unwind—unless they split the rest of the way from the weight of Eddie Moose dropping. What was it Superintendent Mahl had said that first day? *This thing . . . could've turned out to be real messy.*

We're back to square one on that, Pell thought now.

Leaving his room at the motel that evening to walk up and meet Alma for dinner, Pell was approached by several of the media people who were now swarming like locusts all over town. They had seen him earlier, before he changed from the uniform.

"Come on, pal, how about a statement?" one of them asked.

"Yeah," said another, "give us the lowdown on the Indian's last hours."

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Shaking his head, Pell kept walking. "I don't know anything," he said. "I just transferred in from another prison and I'm on gun-tower duty. Sorry."

They had been annoying him for two days now, but he had maintained an innocent unflappability with them that seemed to be working. Tonight they let him alone a little quicker than usual.

Walking across the park, Pell was surprised to see a number of Indians loitering about, sitting on the grass, some of them, incongruously, around the statue of Custer. Two Mankota city deputies were keeping a watchful eye on them, but not making them move on because, Pell imagined, it was a public park and they were not creating any disturbance.

As Pell rounded the Custer statue, a voice said quietly from the shadows, "Hey, man—"

Pell tensed, not knowing what to expect. He took a step back as a young Indian came out of the shadows.

"Take it easy, man," the voice said calmingly.

"What do you want?" Pell asked sharply.

"I'm just looking for a little information," the man said. He stepped closer, a clean-cut, handsome young Native American, dressed in the roughout clothes of a wrangler. "You work at the prison, right?" he asked.

"That's right."

The young man held up a fifty-dollar bill. "Tell me where to find the hangman and this is yours."

"I don't know anything about a hangman," Pell disclaimed, perhaps a bit too quickly.

"Look, be reasonable," the young man said. "We don't want to hurt him or anything like that. All's we want is for our holy man to perform a dance near him."

"You want to cast a spell on him," Pell accused.

"A spell? No, man, you got it all wrong. All's we want is to pray he does his job well. So's Eye-of-the-Moose will die a quick, clean death."

Pell frowned. "You want to pray *for* the hangman?"

"Sure. Anything else would be stupid, wouldn't it?"

Pell stared at him for a long moment, thinking about his snagged rope, thinking he could use a prayer or two. But finally he said, "I'm sorry, I can't help you," and walked away.

Alma was already at their table, sipping iced tea, when he entered the Prairie House. "I was beginning to think the Indians had gotten

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you," she said. "Or the media. I'm not sure which would be worse." She studied him curiously. "How do you feel?"

"I'm all right," he assured her.

"Is everything ready for the morning?"

"Everything's ready, yes." For a moment he debated with himself telling her about the snagged rope. He decided against it.

One of the sisters brought their dinner. While they were eating, Superintendent Mahl came into the dining room with an attractive woman and two young children. As the family was being seated, he nodded a greeting across the room to Pell and Alma, who nodded back.

"He seems calm enough," Pell commented.

"Why shouldn't he be?" Alma asked rhetorically. *"He's* not being hanged at sunrise."

They ate in silence for several minutes, then Pell said, "Tomorrow night when we have dinner, it'll all be over and we can talk about us. I don't know how you feel, but it'll be a relief to me."

"It will be to me, too," Alma said. Her eyes shifted to the table. "But I should warn you, it's not going to be an easy conversation."

"Deep, dark secrets?" Pell asked, eyebrows raising.

"You'll have to wait and see, Herbert."

Pell did not press her. After they had eaten and were lingering over coffee, Superintendent Mahl came over to their table. "I see you've found the only decent place in town to eat," he said to Pell. "Enjoy your meal?"

"Yes, very much, thank you," Pell said. "If it weren't for Miss Dent, I'd probably have ended up at that greasy spoon called Tom's Cafe every night."

"I'm glad she saved you from that. Ptomaine Tom's, the locals call it." Mahl glanced at his watch and looked at Alma. "You're not forgetting the time, I hope."

"No, sir, I'm not," Alma replied. Her tone was like that of a sergeant addressing a general: respectful but detached. Pell watched their expressions for a sign of something personal between them—he did not know what. But there was nothing. It seemed to be all business.

Presently, after Mahl returned to his own table, Alma said, somewhat resignedly, "I suppose we'd better go."

She had left the prison pool-car on the other side of the little park, and as they walked back to it their hands brushed lightly several times.

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"What was that business about not forgetting the time?" Pell finally had to ask.

"It's a long story," Alma replied absently. She appeared to Pell to be in deep thought about something. When they reached the car, Pell started to open the door for her, but she said, "Never mind. Let's walk." Her eyes locked to his. "Take me to your motel room."

An hour later, Alma sat cross-legged and naked on the bed in his room, the sheet gathered around her lower body. She dragged her fingernails lightly along Pell's back. "Did you enjoy it?" she asked.

"That's a silly question," he replied drowsily.

"It's not a silly question at all. Answer me."

"Of course I enjoyed it. I would have had to be dead not to enjoy it." He rolled over, affording himself a most extraordinary view of her full, freckled breasts; the freckles even spread to their undersides. "Have you ever been married?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No."

"I find that almost incredible," Pell said. "How have you managed to escape matrimony all these years?"

Alma sighed quietly and pulled the sheet up around her like a shawl. Her flat, gray eyes seemed to study him for a moment, as if weighing his value. When she finally spoke again, it was in a precise, evenly modulated tone, like a class valedictorian might use.

"Superintendent Mahl reminded me about the time because I have to be back at the prison by ten."

"You mean you have to work tonight?"

"No. Not that prison. The other one: the women's prison. I live in a dormitory there. It's for inmates on the work-release program. I'm a convict."

Pell was totally incredulous. "A *convict?* I don't believe it."

"Believe it or not," Alma shrugged. "It's true." Uncrossing her legs, she dropped the sheet and stood up. From a chair where her clothes were piled, she picked up a pair of cotton panties and stepped into them. "I told you I came here when I was seventeen," she said as she dressed. "I did—but it was to serve time in the women's prison. I spent twenty years on the inside. I've been on work-release for two."

Pell was thunderstruck. "Twenty years! My God, you must have—"

His words broke off. He could not say it. There was only one crime for which a seventeen-year-old girl would be sent to prison for that long.

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She confirmed his thought. "My sentence was life. For murder."

Pell got up and started dressing also. While he did, Alma told him about her crime.

"It isn't a particularly unique story, except the way it ended, I guess. When I was a senior in high school, I got a part-time job afternoons working for a dentist in town. We were in the office alone together a lot. He was twice my age, but that didn't matter to me. I fell for him hard and heavy, and we began an affair; you wouldn't believe the positions two people can get into on one of those dental chairs.

"Anyway, I got careless and I got pregnant. When I told him about it, he offered to get me an abortion. It wasn't legal back then; he was going to get some doctor friend of his to do it on the dental chair. I was scared to death; I said no. Being young and stupid, I wanted him to divorce his wife and marry me. He told me I was being—childish. I got mad and threatened to tell the whole town about us. He just laughed and said he'd deny it. He said he'd claim that I came to him already pregnant and tried to get him to help me get an abortion, that he refused, and that I made up a lie about him to get even.

"I cried and got hysterical, begged and pleaded, did all the usual things, but nothing worked. When I got ready to go home after our last big scene, he told me not to come back; I was fired." Alma had her skirt and shoes on now, and was putting on her bra, hooking it in front, reversing it, and scooping her breasts into their cotton cups. She paused and stared, as if reliving her memory. "When I went to school the next day, I took one of my mother's kitchen knives with me. I sat in class with it in my purse all day. After school, I went up to the dental office. The son of a bitch already had a new girl: some waitress from the drive-in. Anyway, I just walked right in while he was filling one of the local Ford dealer's bicuspids and stuck that kitchen knife straight into his heart." A slight smile played at her lips. "They gave me life because of premeditation: having the knife with me all day. I guess it was fair. All I know is he got what he deserved for not coming through for me." The little smile turned sad. "Anyhow, I came to Mankota and had my baby at the prison. A little girl. I only got to hold her once; I don't even know who adopted her."

They both finished dressing in the tacky little motel room that an hour earlier had been a sweet warm place of passion but was now suddenly seedy again. Pell periodically shook his head in amaze-

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ment. "I don't know what to say," he told her finally.

"Does it change the way you feel about me?" Alma asked. Her tone was quiet but it was a challenge nevertheless.

"No, of course not," Pell disclaimed at once. "It's just that—well, it all takes on a different light—"

"But if it doesn't change the way we feel," Alma seized, "then we can still go on with our plans."

"What plans?"

She shrugged. "Well, I don't know exactly, Herbert. Whatever plans you've been making while you've been pestering me to get personal. Whatever we were going to talk about tomorrow after the hanging. What were *you* thinking about?"

"I'm not sure exactly," he admitted awkwardly. "I don't think I had anything *definite* in mind—"

"Well, I did," she asserted, buttoning her blouse. "I already told you that I plan to leave here in three years; that's when I go on full release. I've asked Superintendent Mahl if he'd like to have you on his corrections staff and he said he would—"

"You mean as a guard?"

"Of course. But it would only be for three years, Herbert. Then we could go wherever we wanted to. Back to that little town in Louisiana, if that's what you wanted. Just as soon as you help me find my daughter." Alma suddenly looked at her watch. "I have *got* to go." Snatching up her purse, she kissed Pell briefly on the lips and said, "See you at the hanging, hon."

Pell stared at the door after she had gone, his mouth slightly agape.

It was an eerie, ethereal scene the next morning in the old stone building where convicts had once made license plates. Outside, a pre-sunrise cast of dimness was pushing upward in advance of the daylight behind it; the plains remained still and cold from the night. Inside, several large tarpaulins of heavy canvas had been strung across the room in front of the gallows, concealing it from the assembled media and official witnesses seated on folding chairs awaiting the execution. Nearly everyone was hunched up against the chill air, smoking, speaking in quiet voices. Six corrections officers stood at intervals in front of the tarps to ensure that no one looked behind it before the appointed time.

Straddling a ladder on the concealed scaffold, Pell was securing his rope in place around the gallows tree so that its noose would

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hang to the proper height above the trapdoor. He had tried to rig the rope in such a way that the snag would have another strand wrapped over it, but that had not been possible. The snagged section would be about ten inches under the gallows tree and there wasn't a damned thing he could do about it. The rope either took the weight of Eddie Moose's body or it didn't. If it did, Pell—and everybody else, especially Eddie Moose—would be lucky. If it didn't . . .

Pell did not even want to think about it. His stomach was in knots, sweat was rivuleting down his spine, and the taste in his mouth reminded him of the way spoiled hamburger meat smelled. If he got through this one, he silently swore to himself, he would never bitch about the twine plant again.

When all was ready, Captain Farrell and six death-watch guards brought Eddie Moose in through the back door. He was bound in a straitjacket, walking unsteadily. A putrid odor emanated from the group. Farrell, who had a large dark wet spot on one sleeve, whispered irritably to Pell. "The son of a bitch puked on me."

Superintendent Mahl and Alma came in behind the condemned man and his escort. Alma had a steno pad in one hand.

"Five twenty-six," Mahl said. "Condemned prisoner arrives at gallows." Alma wrote it down in shorthand. Mahl nodded curtly to Pell. "Let's proceed."

The guards stood Eddie on the trapdoor, facing the tarps that concealed him from the witnesses and they from him. One officer knelt and bound Eddie's ankles together with a leather belt. Eddie's mouth hung open as if his jaw had gone slack; his lips were slightly crusted with his own gray vomit. Black, bullet-hole eyes seemed to be floating in tears that would not spill over his lower lids.

As Pell stepped up behind Eddie to slip the noose on, the condemned man turned his head slightly and said, " 'Member what you promised, man, 'bout my head not being pulled off—"

"I remember," Pell replied, drawing back slightly from Eddie's putrid breath. It was not Eddie's head coming off that concerned Pell; it was the snagged strands not holding and Eddie plummeting straight down to the cement floor like a runaway elevator, breaking his ankles, jamming his knees, compressing his spine—but not being killed. He would have to be carried back up to the gallows, probably screaming in pain, and rehung with an ordinary rope, the result of which could be anything: strangulation, decapitation, or even a repeat rope-breaking, all because of a snag caused by one goddamned

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convict carpenter who hadn't given one nail one final blow with a hammer.

*And because of a hangman who hadn't bothered to check the gallows tree before tying his precious rope to it.* Pell finally admitted it to himself in that final moment while he closed the noose around the condemned man's throat and placed the thirteen-loop slipknot directly behind the left ear so that, ideally, it would break Eddie Moose's neck in one swift snap, sending him to—where?—heaven, hell, oblivion, wherever death *really* sent people: a hole in the ground or an ashes urn, that was it as far as Herbert Pell was concerned. But wherever, it was Pell's job to send him there as painlessly as possible. And if it did not happen that way today, it would be Pell's fault and he knew it.

"Five-thirty," Superintendent Mahl said. "The execution noose is in place." Alma wrote it down and Mahl stepped over to Eddie Moose, but not close enough to smell him fully. "Do you want a hood?"

Eddie swallowed and nodded. Mahl gestured to Farrell, who handed a black cotton hood to one of the guards. "You do it," Farrell said.

"Five thirty-one," Mahl said. "Condemned man requested a hood and one was put in place over his head."

Everyone now backed away from the grotesquely prepared man standing on the trapdoor. Pell went to the release lever, concealed in one corner of the gallows by a medical screen on wheels from the prison dispensary, with a wool blanket draped over it for additional privacy.

"Five thirty-two," Mahl said. "Execution apparatus is in place." He gave a signal to two guards specially assigned to the task, and they released the tarps that separated the witness section. There was immediate silence among the spectators: officials, media representatives, and those selected by the Northern Cheyenne to watch their brother die at the end of the white man's rope.

Mahl quickly unfolded a document, the order of execution, and read it aloud. Then, without approaching the condemned man, who by now had urinated in his pants, asked loudly, "Any last words?"

"This ain't right," Eddie Moose said. But he said it so softly that only the closest witnesses could make out his words.

"Proceed," Mahl said loudly.

Behind the screen, Pell, face slick with sweat, pulled the lever—and waited with eyes closed.

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He heard the trapdoor fall open. Heard the slight rush of air as the condemned man dropped. Heard the soft *twang!* as the rope caught.

Then there was an ugly, sickening crack.

Pell opened his eyes and sucked in a great gulp of air as relief flushed through him. That crack was Eddie Moose's neck breaking.

The rope had held.

Pell and Alma ate breakfast two hours later in a booth next to the window at "Ptomaine" Tom's Cafe. Ravenous, they had breakfast steaks, eggs, biscuits and gravy, and cup after cup of coffee. While they were eating, they saw the media bus go by on its way to a chartered pool-plane waiting at the airport.

"Vultures," Alma said scathingly. "Reporters haven't changed one bit since they covered my trial. 'How does it feel to know you're going to spend the rest of your life in prison, Miss Dent?' 'How does it feel to know you're going to die by hanging in a few hours, Mr. Moose?' 'How did it feel, little girl, when you were raped and beaten and tortured for days by the men who abducted you?' How the hell do they *think* it felt? Scum, all of them."

Pell did not comment. Alma was in a black mood. He had unceremoniously decided to leave Mankota on the nine-thirty commuter plane that morning, and his suitcase and rope box were at that moment in the prison pool-car parked outside. Mahl had offered him a job, assuring him that he would be a sergeant in six months, a lieutenant in two years, but he had said only that he would consider it. To Alma he had given a rambling excuse composed of vague parts.

"I spoke to my boss at the cordage plant after you left last night. He's having some serious problems and needs me back there right away. Besides, I really should be at home to start putting together the financial particulars and such if I'm going to divorce Heather; it'll probably be very complicated, her being in one state, me another. And this will give us both a chance to think things over and evaluate our feelings for each other without any pressure—"

"You're not coming back, are you, Herbert?"

He was beginning to *hate* her habit of interrupting. "Don't be silly. Of course I'm coming back. There are just a few things—"

"No, you're not coming back."

Outside, a short procession of old cars and a couple of pickups and flatbeds, all driven by and carrying Indians, moved slowly down the

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street. On one of the flatbeds, with a dozen men sitting around it, was a new plain wooden coffin that the prison carpentry shop had built for Eddie Moose. To Pell, it looked as if it had been constructed of the same kind of wood used for the gallows. It's good, Pell thought, that Eddie Eye-of-the-Moose's people are taking him home; at least he wouldn't have to be buried on this halfway-to-hell tundra. That little town in Louisiana, even with its oppressive humidity, hordes of mosquitoes, and mind-dulling job, was taking on new and positive features in Pell's mind.

"I should have known it would end like this," Alma said, now interrupting even his thoughts. "I should have known you wouldn't come through for me."

"Alma, really, you're blowing this all out of proportion—"

"Like hell."

"Well, I'm not going to try to reason with you if that's the attitude you're going to take," Pell said. "Let's just finish breakfast and go on out to the airport. Maybe you'll want to discuss it rationally out there."

Alma's flat gray eyes locked on him for a long moment, long enough to make him distinctly uncomfortable. But he was determined to see his decision through.

"Please don't stare at me like that," he said.

Alma's eyes brightened and her expression softened. "I'm sorry, Herbert." She put her hand on his arm across the table. "You must think I'm awful."

Pell gave her a tolerant smile. "Just a little childish," he said. He patted her hand. "Finish your breakfast."

A few minutes later, they got up to leave. As Pell walked up to the counter to pay their check, Alma paused long enough to pick up a paper napkin and wipe off the blade of her steak knife.

While Pell's back was still turned, she slipped the knife into her purse.

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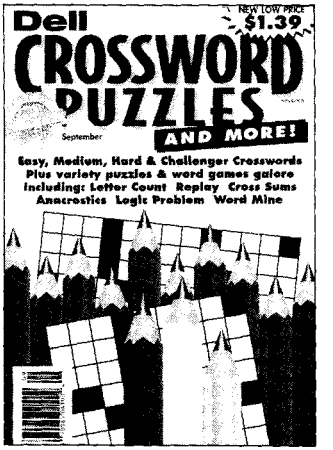


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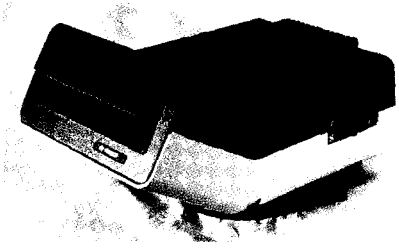
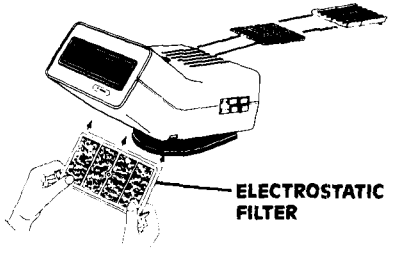
Clean air is vital to overall good health and general well-being and there is growing concern about the quality of the air around us. Amcor's Air Processor is uniquely designed to remove indoor air pollution and improve air quality. This compact unit has a high voltage generator that produces negatively charged ions that clean the air of cigarette/cigar smoke, dust, pollen, fungal and bacterial particles as well as a host of other allergy stimuli. The Air Processor also features a blower for air circulation and a unique filter that is permanent and washable. Includes a free Ionoscope that detects the negative ions emitted from the ion generator and proves that it is functioning. Very quiet so it is perfect for any room in your house. UL listed. **$99.98** ($6.50) #A2002.

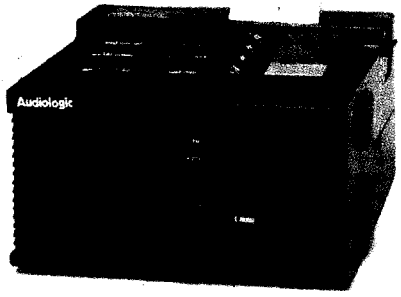




ELECTROSTATIC FILTER

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

## SLEEP SOUNDLY WITH SOUND SLEEPER




Is noise pollution interfering with your ability to get a good night's sleep? If so, then the Sound Sleeper by Audiologic is the clock radio of your dreams. Sound Sleeper combines a state of the art AM/FM cassette clock radio with the benefits of natural sound conditioning. Sound Sleeper lets you fall asleep to the sounds of ocean surf, rushing waterfalls and/or rainfall with the flip of a switch. After a relaxing night's sleep, wake up with a buzzer or music from the radio or cassette. So why have an ordinary clock radio when you can have the cassette clock radio that not only wakes you up but also lulls you to sleep! **$89.98** ($5.50) #A2000.

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**TO ORDER:** Send check with item number for total amounts, plus shipping & handling shown in ( ) payable to **MAIL ORDER MALL** Dept. 023 EL ; P.O.Box 3006, Lakewood, N.J. 08701, or call TOLL FREE **1-800-722-9999**. NJ residents add 7% sales tax. We honor MasterCard, Visa, and American Express. Sorry, no Canadian, foreign, or C.O.D. orders. Satisfaction Guaranteed. 30 day money back guarantee for exchange or refund. Allow 30 days for delivery.

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